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Identity Conflicts and Complexities in Joyce Carol Oates' Black Girl/White Girl

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Abstract

Joyce Carol Oates' novel *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006) entertains a complex relationship of race and contradictions of identities illuminated through the plight of a young black girl and her white college roommate. This research attempts to examine the difficulties and complexities of identity formation for Minette Swift and Genna Hewett-Meade which have been underdeveloped through both individual agency and the sociocultural context. The main instruments dictating their identity construction and contradictions are memory, social expectations, religion, and white guilt. These interconnected factors underscore difficulties in their identity formation and pose challenges to both characters and shape their individual and group experiences. This shared heritage, experienced, accepted, or rejected, gives an illusion of the construction of categories of culture and identity. An illusion irrelevant to the complex interplay among the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal contexts and realities. The characters' Inherited memory serves as a catalyst for resistance and a counter for subjective experiences. Religion becomes central to the internal logic of their identity structure and points to the strengths and weaknesses of their characters. Overemphasis on White guilt results in more defensiveness and negative attitudes. Their immediate context and relationship are influenced by these sources and determinants, resulting in complex and multifaceted levels of discomfort, isolation, ostracization and disengagement.

Keywords: Black Girl/White Girl, Identity Contradictions, Memory, Social Expectations, White Guilt.

دژییەکی و ئاڵۆزییەکانی ناسنامە لە ڕۆمانی جویس کارول ئوتس کچی ڕەش/ کچی سپی

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پوختە:

ئەم کارە کۆمەڵێك پەیوەندیی ئاڵۆزی ڕەچەڵەکیی و جیاوازییە شوناسییەکانی نەهامەتییەکانی کچێکی گەنجی ڕەش و هاوپۆلە سپییەکەی باس دەکات. ئەم لێکۆڵینەوەیە هەوڵی ئەوە دەدات لە ناڕەحەتیی و ئاڵۆزییەکانی تایبەت بە ئەو زانیارییە شوناسییانەی مینێت سویفت و جێنا هەویت مید ورد ببێتەوە کە لە هەردو ئاستی توانای کەسیی و سیاقی کۆمەڵا یەتی و کەلتوریدا زانیاریی پێنەگەیشتون. هۆکارە سەرەکییەکانی نیشاندانی پێکهاتە و جیاوازییەکانی شوناسیان بریتین لە یادەوەری و چاوەڕوانییە کۆمەڵایەتییەکان و ئایین و تاوانی سپی. ئەم هۆکارە هاوپەیوەستانە جەخت لە گرانیی زانیارییە شوناسییەکانیان دەکات و هەردو کارەکتەر ڕووبەڕوی ئاڵەنگاریی دەکاتەوە و شێوە بە ئەزمونەکانیان وەك تاکەکەس و گروپ دەدات. ئەم میراتە هاوبەشە ئەزمونکراو، پەسەندکراو یان ڕەتکراوەیە خەیاڵێك لەسەر بونیادنانی جۆرەکانی کەلتور و شوناس دەهێنێتە کایەوە. ئەم خەیاڵەش پەیوەندیی بە ئەو پێکداچونە ئاڵۆزەی نێوان بارودۆخی تاکەکەسی و کەسێتی و ڕێکخراوەیی و کۆمەڵگەیی و، ڕاستییەکانەوە نییە. یادەوەریی بۆماوە وەك هۆکارێکی یارمەتیدەر بۆ بەرهەڵستیکردن و وەك دژبەرێك بۆ ئەزمونە خودییەکان کار دەکات. ئایین دەبێتە کایەیەکی ناوەندیی بۆ لۆجیکی ناوخۆیی پێکهاتەی شوناسیان و دەبێتە ئاماژەپێدەری بەهێزیی و لاوازییەکانی کارەکتەریان. زیاد لە پێویست جەختکردنەوە لە 'تاوانی سپی' دەبێتە هۆی بەرگریکاریی و هەڵوێستی نەرێنیی زیاتر. دۆخ و پەیوەندییە ڕاستەوخۆکانیان بە ئەم سەرچاوە و بڕیاردەرانە کاریگەر دەبن کە لە ئاکامی نائاسودەییەکی ئاڵۆز و فرەڕو و دابڕان و گۆشەگیری و تێکەڵنەبونەوە دێنە ئاراوە.

کلیلە وشەکان: جیاوازییە شوناسییەکان، یادەوەری، هە ست بە تاوانی سپی، چاوەڕوانییە کۆمەڵایەتییەکان.

1. **Introduction**

Oates' *Black Girl/White Girl*, a riveting novel, is based on, and as she herself describes, “actual sequence of events that took place in a college dormitory in the 1970s” (Schappell 2006: 16), staging two freshmen college roommates at the fictitious exclusive women's liberal college in Philadelphia. Genna Hewett-Meade, the white girl, is the daughter of a notorious radical lawyer and descended from the college's founder. The black roommate, Minette Swift, is the daughter of a charismatic minister from Washington, D.C., and a student on scholarship. She grows assertive, extremely individualist, and unpopular with black and white students alike, in contrast to Genna, who is a quiet, self-effacing teenager. Minette is plagued by racial abuses and harassment and eventually consumed by depression. Despite her merits and previous school records, Minette fails at this school and dies a mysterious and violent death. Fifteen years later, Genna attempts an unofficial

inquiry to examine and reconstruct the events of this traumatic event. Nevertheless, Minette's final fate remains a mystery unresolved at the end of the novel.

The work depicts the relationship between Genna and Minette, and through this relationship, readers might picture the macro relationship among black and white individuals with psychological and emotional depth. Possibly, it reveals the world of post-war America, showing how social organization influences the formation of identity and agency of the rising generation. Genna tries all possible means to normalize the relationship. However, various challenges stand in the way. Readers wonder why Minette and Genna have a difficult time to come into terms with each other. It is not hard to understand their situation and to explain the constant resentment of Minette against all those around her, as shown in a variety of ways, despite all that she is offered. Genna remains in shock and is deeply hurt by Minette's reaction and ingratitude despite her benevolence towards her, offering the courage and hope Minette needs to overcoming adversity and standing her ground.

Closer examination of the work yields an understanding that this situation is brought by a complex, interconnected and multifaceted context. This would be clarified through identifying the structures upholding their character and identity, namely: memory, social expectation, white guilt, and religion. These factors and realities mostly influence the formation of Minette's identity, deny her independence from the control of others. As a result, Minette's character throughout the novel is framed and judged as offensive or abrasive. She is described as: "defiant; "tense"; "indignant"; "rude"; "tremulous"; "sullen-sulky"; "uneasy"; "self-doubting", etc. Often, Genna admits that she feels sorry for her. This distinct personality remains an enigma to Genna and the school.

This research indicates that the factors mentioned above contribute to such behavior. Minette has developed memories from stories she heard of black victims of past racial violence. History is presented in the novel in forms of memory and accounts, through these forms, she continues the hatred and tradition of abuse and internalizes them. Collective memory and history have shaped her cognitive functioning in terms of her social relationships and membership. This results in viewing herself outside of socialization and unaffected by the tremendous changes and opportunities offered in the new cultural environment. She fails to build a life of her own and constantly appears to conflict with herself as well as others. This is despite her attempt to show that her life is truly hers for the shaping; rather, she is consumed with fear and anxiety. For Minette, there is no distinction between personal and social identities; the personal and collective identities

become one. Both characters stereotype each other in terms of their group memberships. They both assume the other as a racialized individual who has the same realities, the same experiences in the same contexts, attributed to her group. This blinds them and hides the ways that individuals can exist without or outside racialized groups. Despite Genna seemingly contrasting herself and her roles in society, she remains stratified by certain boundaries of values and expectations. Genna's knowledge of racial power codes and awareness of the history of white superiority and the brutality towards people of color lead her to a mind trap that limits her ability to see Minette's unique and distinct character outside white and non-white boundaries. She insists on describing Minette in racial terms and this dichotomy remains a source of discomfort in their relationship. Religion is also one of the divisive areas, as both characters show contrasting experiences and views, and it fails to provide them with a shared identity. For Minette, unlike Genna, religion is a crucial defining characteristic of identity. Finally, and as the research attempts to show, the structural consequences of Genna's consciousness of White guilt result in the denial of Minette to project or identify her identity, apart from how the world expects her to be.

2. Memory

Stories, memories, and personal narratives define and determine identity (Freeman 1993: 30). In fact, Descartes' famous postulation "I think, therefore I am" is usually adjusted as "I remember, therefore I am" (Lampinen et al., 2004: 4). Memory is what divides the roommates past and coming to terms with a meaningful present afterwards. Memory sets the tone for most of the novel; in effect, the whole narrative is set on recollecting past events and trying to give meaning to them. It unconsciously dictates their relationship and both characters remain preoccupied by these legacies and are constituted by them and grow haunted by their memories and flooded with emotions and sensations accordingly. Personal and collective memories intertwine within the novel for both characters. This as collective memory also makes sense of reality and defines individual identity (Assmann 2008: 51). The crucial role of memories can be recognized through connecting events with memory.

From the start, Minette is alienated from her surroundings and often displays offensive behavior. Her outlook towards the other characters throughout the novel, including her roommate, is usually negative; something Genna can neither understand nor justify. Minette's rebellion against conformity and rules, similar to her experiences, is painted with memory and serves as a hurdle for her integration and precludes her from normal identity formation. This results in a slew of clumsy interactions with her peers and, particularly, the

characters' taut relations. Minette never forgets, or does not seem to, rather tries to connect every incident to real or perceived racial hatred incidents. One example is the incident of one of Minette's textbooks, the *American Literature Anthology*. The text seemed "as if it had been dropped in mud and kicked about" (Oates 2006: 55). Although Genna fixed the book, but Minette refused saying "like this makes some diff'rence! Like this means nobody stole my property and vandalized it out of meanness! That's what you're trying to tell me?" (Oates 2006: 59). Minette overreacted even when Genna offered to lend her own textbook to her, "It was like Minette's soul had been mutilated, she was that upset" (Oates 2006: 68). Minette refused to accept this as a mere incident or a prank as Genna tried to explain. In fact, she has gone as far filing a case for investigation and suggesting that Genna covers up the incident. Afterwards, and still overreacting, Minette used to carry "a selection of her more expensive books with her in a backpack" (Oates 2006: 76). The window incident is an example of perceived reality. Obviously, the windowpane of their room was broken because of the storm, yet Minette tried to perceive it as a racial attack. When Genna reported the incident and the window was fixed, Minette responded that "and what good'll that do, they will only break it again" (Oates 2006: 18).

Minette's sense of aggression and dissatisfaction with the world, distaste for school regarding its social environment, overreaction and overly emotional response to these events can be explained through her memory landscapes, from perceived or real history. Later, readers come to know the major destroying force for Minette, which might offer insights into her inner struggle, a story that opens a long-overdue memory. A story is a space that hosts the continuity of the process between past and present that spans over generations. Genna found "a yellowed newspaper clipping from the Carolina Negro Record," among the belongings of Minette, which dates from June 1951 (24 years earlier) that reads:

> I was an eyewitness to the lynching of Nelson Swift in Jasper County, South Carolina. The lynching was in a field near the County Fairground. The victim was a young black man of 29. He had been released from the county jail and was on foot when captured by a mob of Ku Klux Klan and others. There was a conversation between Jasper County sheriff's deputies and the Klan leaders, and the deputies did not remain. The crowd was quite large, maybe 200 individuals, including some women and young people. Nelson Swift was screaming as the mob leaders stripped him of his clothes and mutilated him with knives in his lower body. He was then tied with a rope

> around his neck and dragged from the rear of a truck to the field. By this time, the crowd was much larger, perhaps 500… (Oates 2006: 198-99).

Genna continues reading this horrific account which describes the fate of this poor slave. Now, she seems to be apologetic to the manner and character of Minette which seems to be demarked by this event, shaping her attitude towards society. She says, "several times I read this horrific account. My vision blurred with tears" (Oates 2006: 117). Readers cannot help but sympathize with this insider's viewpoint offered to critique the culture and the possible personal relationship to Minette. Perhaps Minette has never been able to confine these narratives and stories to the past and has remained preoccupied by its legacy.

Genna never has the chance or the courage to discuss this with Minette afterwards. Even if this young Swift has no blood relationship with Minette Swift, this is part of the collective memory. After all, group memory revolves around entanglements on both the individual and group levels. For her, old narrative and race distinctions are made meaningful in particular ways, namely drawing boundaries. Minette needs these boundaries to provide herself a sense of continuity and any disruption of the past is a disruption of the social construct. Collective remembrance and collectivities retain group cohesion as Benedict Anderson emphasizes (Anderson 2016: 201).

Thus, above all other considerations, Minette's stance of memory does not allow her into any levels of self-categorization and process, as in fact she makes no effort to distinguish herself from being a representative of her traditional social and racial category. Hence and not surprisingly, readers do not see a functional shift in self-perception from personal to social identity. In fact, she is caught in a process of self-victimization. This is despite the chance of going through stages that would allow her to form and develop her individual character. She does not consider detaching herself from history and is not willing to create new images and events to associate with. She also keeps distance from other black girls, perhaps as they are no longer associated with such collective memories and cultural narratives. Indeed, one of the black students ridicules her for thinking that her father is 'Martin Luther Jr' (Oates 2006: 67). Her black colleagues have new grand and personal narratives of equality replacing the old stories. These young girls aspire to change in their own lives and in the culture, despite the nuances and undercurrents of society both in time and space. For Minette, these memories are what make her and her identity; they are the present and the future, irrespective of the changes and experiences of the moment.

Genna's memories also play an important part of her identity. However, Genna, unlike Minette, is not caught in illusions and memories do not lead her to a sense of disappointment. Genna has control over her memory through a duality of perspectives as she constantly explores herself and her role in society. She seems to both experience and resist these memories. Genna is typical of her environment in being forgetful about the past; she describes the general mood in the school as "the collective wish was to forget" (Oates 2006: 228). This was said following the incident with the textbook when the students showed sympathy for Minette. This is also more usual among people as remembering the past can be also unwanted, and events may be forgotten, "people remember or forget the past according to the needs of the present, and social memory is an active and ongoing process" (Van Dyke et al., 2003:3). Genna, tends to hide the past atrocities and focus on the bright side. For Genna, and unlike Minette, memory is not at hand; it has to be triggered despite the presence of a wide variety of past narratives and violent histories, as seen below in one of her memory triggers scenes:

> Several feet beyond the window was [*sic*] an old oak tree with thick gnarled limbs. One of these had split in the storm and hung down broken, its pale raw wood like bone piercing flesh. I was reminded [emphasis added] uneasily of one of my father's photographs, on a wall of his study in our home in Chadds Ford: a framed glossy photo of a young black man who'd been beaten by heavily armed Los Angeles riot police in April 1968 following the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The young black man lay on filthy pavement streaming blood from head wounds, writhing in agony, the stark white bone of his right arm grotesquely piercing his flesh at the elbow. Whenever I entered my father's study in his absence it was this photograph that immediately drew my eye though I would instruct myself each time *No! Don't look* [emphasis in original] (Oates 2006: 7).

This memory comes back when one of the students shoved a racist drawing beneath their door, yet instead of reporting the incident, Genna flushed it down the toilet. Here Genna says, "*I thought of* [emphasis added] the photograph of the lynching, in my father's study" (Oates 2006: 127). Once triggered and suddenly, the scenes suddenly become blended with her memories and readers witness her ability to express or relive those experiences. Accordingly, she develops an alternative concept of memory and historical consciousness distinct from Minette. Thus, by being selective in what to remember, Genna can reshape

and rearrange the way the past is recollected according to her interests only, and memories are employed to validate images of current experiences.

3. Social Expectations/ Stereotyping

Both characters try to form identities of their own, yet they face boundaries and constrictions set by their surroundings and the expectations of society as well as the ones set by themselves. Genna and Minette both think of each other more as group members than in terms of individual characters and they maintain expectations of one another based on their group identities. Conflict arises as these expectations, which exert huge pressure on both characters, are usually in conflict with how characters perceive themselves on a primarily individual level and lead to stereotyping, forming judgments and prejudice. Among the two, Minette suffers the most while rejecting the cognitive and affective aspects of her identity being formed by the perspectives of others.

For Minette, and prior to her arrival at the school, is flooded with expectations. In their turn, and out of all factors influencing self-identity, the factors associated with one's family and environmental backgrounds are the most important. This is her future place in society is defined within the configurations and folds of her family. She feels compelled to the ideals of her parents. Especially as she was "the first to attend college" among her cousins and as Genna "expects", there "was jealousy of her among the relatives" (Oates 2006: 90). This puts her under obligation to consider such cultural ideals and internalize the values and expectations of her parents even though these ideals may not reflect the perceptions she has for herself. Following the arrival at the school, Minette is immediately faced with a number of expectations considering her racial, social, and religious backgrounds. Genna and her mother, Veronica, the open-minded white characters, immediately establish expectations for Minette and her family: "I saw that Veronica was watching the black family, too. Their dress and manner marked them as distinctive. Unlike other blacks at the Orientation Day events, they might have been of the 1950s or earlier" (Oates 2006: 31).

Shortly after being excited to have a black girl as her roommate, knowing that Minette stands out of her race, Genna admits her disappointment as Minette fails her expectations. She would have little to discuss about her roommate with her father. This as her father has a typical profile to classify Minette as "an exploited, colonized victim of Caucasian/American imperialism" (Oates 2006: 144) and Minette would not classify herself as such. Minette would not understand Genna's father's part of the political or national

elite, and his vision for the construction of a new and inclusive American culture. Genna is annoyed seeing Minette distancing herself from archetypal Blacks and this is a source of disappointment for her. It is expected of Minette to actively participate in her Black culture, and Genna knows her father would be disappointed in Minette for not being so, not only to Genna and her father, but also to other students: “In the freshman class at Schuyler, Minette Swift was emerging as something of an enigma: a black girl who didn't act "black."” (Oates 2006: 17). Other black girls were also embarrassed of her (Oates 2006: 177).

The mechanism of Minette’s inclusion to the new mainstream black culture is to be associated with new events, heroes, cultural symbols, rules, regulations, collective representations, and cultural narratives. For example, Genna is annoyed that Minette was careless of the importance of jazz music to African American culture, “when I told her that their voices were beautiful, the songs they'd recorded were not only haunting but were historically important, she laughed in disbelief” (Oates 2006: 93). Genna was annoyed that Minette “disdained jazz as "low-life"” (Oates 2006: 93), she adds that “I could not bear to have my father learn that Minette Swift scorned jazz and claimed never to have heard Billie Holiday sing” (Oates 2006: 144). On the other hand, Minette’s highly considered candle-lighting practice is also viewed as low and dead black culture. Genna’s prospect is also falsified as Minette does not appreciate being student at the prestigious and ‘liberal’ school, “yet Minette didn't appear especially impressed, as, in her droll, frequently sarcastic way, she wasn't especially impressed with Schuyler College traditions and rituals” (Oates 2006: 12). Minette is expected to appreciate what the new society has offered her.

Genna’s expectations for Minette are set despite the insights she has about the situation of Minette and yet she has failed to act as a moderator for her. Genna recognizes why Minette lacks the need of belonging, she says: “it seemed to me, as I uttered these dramatic words, that it was true, Minette was behaving as if her soul had been mutilated. Whether other people "liked" her was not important” (Oates 2006: 68). She also recognizes what she calls Minette’s dislike of "familiarity" and "pushiness" (Oates 2006: 15). Similarly, she is aware that Minette “doesn't much care that she's black and doesn't care at all for your caring” (Oates 2006: 92). Yet what annoys Genna is what her father and the school community would think of her roommate.

Genna’s outlooks are influenced by an interplay between personal and social expectations. Group identity, above all other considerations, determines the extent to which one is acceptable and remains very much a part of the organization of contemporary society. Even though Genna states that she did not think of Minette as black, nor Minette think of

herself as one (Oates 2006: 177), she and throughout her narration does social categorization. This is part of a society which is still structured in relation to the contrasting black vs. white categories and is expressed in binary terms of such. Genna attempts to impose a racialized identity on Minette through a 'social recategorization' of her. Genna is highly influenced by the views that others have of Minette. One reason might be Genna's submission to the belief that individuals are only defined within the social context, despite saying otherwise. This is because people often rely on others to construct a social reality which influences how they feel and think (Hardin & Higgins 1996: 38). The sense of uniqueness of Minette as an individual is lost amidst the expectation of sameness and the necessity of being a member of a group. Genna is not sure; she ponders if the way Minette behaves or is perceived by others is because of her facial features. Genna wonders why other black girls could fit among white middle-class students and strive to distance themselves from Minette.

Lastly, for Genna, creating and maintaining an identity with a positive public image is more important than who she really is, despite claiming the uniqueness of her views. She chides Minette as she "had made herself generally disliked in Haven House and elsewhere on campus, for her fiercely outspoken and independent ways" (Oates 2006: 57). Minette's uniqueness has served as a source of stress for the school and an increased gap between her and the public. This contrasts with Genna who describes herself as "friendly with anyone and everyone, who encouraged me with a smile!" (Oates 2006: 16) and says she "was liked by most of the girls in my residence, I think. By some, I was very well-liked" (Oates 2006: 75). Genna is more conscious of her public-identity, how represented and realized. Minette, however, seems to be misled that a new, seemingly liberal and open environment encourages self-evaluation concerning the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors displayed. She misses the cultural reality that she must be framed in terms of belonging to a social category or group membership.

4. Religion

Religion has a significant role in both characters' identities. This is not unusual as there is a positive relationship between religion and the conceptualization of identity among adolescents (King 2003: 199). It is especially the way Minette defines and identifies herself with, and through, which she determines her understanding of the world as positing that she has a stronger religious identity than her roommate. Minette lives in a context where

she continually confronts social and cultural fluctuations. Religion for her, to use Paul Tillich's term, is the ultimate concern (Tillich, 1957: 1). Through observing how both characters develop their ideas about religion, and how religion guides their behaviors and actions, we can better understand their construction and maintenance of group and/or individual identities.

For Minette, the transcendent meaning derived from religious affiliation is important for her well-being and confrontations when every other alternative fails to work. Genna notes how religion and prayers "were a comfort to her" (Oates 2006: 207), and how Minette would resort to prayers during exams (Oates 2006: 98). For Minette, religion relates to practices with ultimate spiritual relevance and influences her way of life. Her religion is shown to be developed uniquely from shared group meanings, through idiosyncratic beliefs apart from the social realities. Certainly, religion or religious identity in her case is reduced merely to her personal perspective; however, she drives meanings enshrined by her context. Her development of a religious identity is motivated both extrinsically, to avoid embarrassment, and intrinsically, as it is personally rewarding. For example, we see her justifying her disinterest to belong to group(s), a lack need of belonging, as Jesus was "all the help" she needed, with anything in her life (Oates 2006: 15). It allows her the transit from her social milieu, and as she thinks, would relieve her from the adaptability of identity and the interaction between her and their broader sociocultural context. Similarly, once she is caught in an embarrassing situation, she resorts to religion. For example, after acting awkwardly in a gift shop, she has been told to leave the store and, in her way out, "she jiggled the door to make the bell tinkle frantically and, in a voice heavy with adolescent sarcasm, she said, "Ma'am, Jesus loves you anyway" (Oates 2006: 152). Genna admits the beneficial and the transcendent meaning derived from religion; despite Minette's feeling of anger, she looks like "a martyr who has forgiven her oppressors as a Christian principle if not in her heart" (Oates 2006: 57).

Although Minette tries to show that her higher level of religiosity has resulted in her psychological well-being, readers can notice some inconsistencies. Occasionally, she is taken by stress, which influences her prayers; her prayers are occasionally shown to have taken "an element of impatience, coercion" (Oates 2006: 98). This is to the point where contradictions in her personality is apparent. This becomes clearer from her pretence of going to church. However, her religious outlook, at least from her perspective, remains stable. Furthermore, she insists on her idiosyncratic beliefs that her religion is exclusive and is not permeable to change. She says, in "a church like ours, there is a purpose to it.

You feel that purpose when you just step inside. Jesus is waiting!" (Oates 2006: 86). She also does not appreciate any other forms of religious practices. When Genna references Quakers, she shows ridicule to its practice-based cultural activity. Again, and as Genna offers to pray for her, she rudely replies "Scuseme, girl, I can pray for myself" (Oates 2006: 235). Genna is stunned by Minette's failure to recognize the potential of a transcendent worldview that religion provides. She fails to notice and appreciate how religious affiliation gives meaning to the social and cultural milieu. This is also clear from their brief discussion about Genna's possible Jewish roots (Oates 2006: 95).

This is in stark contrast to the antagonism shown by Genna's father, Max, against Christianity. For Max, the role of religion, which is a powerful force in black society and less powerful in white society, might have a negligible influence. There is a sharp contrast in the way holiday rituals are observed and regarded by Genna's father, "American holiday rituals as smug, hypocritical, self-indulgent and self-congratulatory" (Oates 2006: 103), compared to the high regard given by Minette and her family to such holidays. This is also clear from the fact that Minette and her family ignore the directive regulations of the school for the sake of Thanksgiving recess (Oates 2006: 13). The correlation between individuals' perspectives and the varying interpretations and observances of a certain religion by different groups is intriguing

However, Genna is perceived to have a more favorable perspective on religion compared to her father, even if she does not actively practice it. She admires Minette's understanding of the real and traditional significance of religion and spirituality, seeing how it is central to Minette's cultural meaning-making and narrative identity processes. She confesses that she "envied Minette Swift her Christian faith for it was a special faith. Her God was a special God whose omnipotence she did not care to dilute by sharing it with just anyone" (Oates 2006: 87). Through observing Minette, Genna is also developing an understanding of her cultural traditions. Genna is critical of her father's religious views:

> I understood that Max was probably right. Still, I hoped that Minette would wish to convert me. When I saw her frowning over her Bible before bed, when I heard her ardent whispered praying, fragments of gospel songs and hymns she sung under her breath with such pleasure, I felt a pang of envy, and anticipation. Clearly, there had to be more here than Max knew (Oates 2006: 14).

Both characters reflect on religion while in search of meaning and a sense of self and identity. Its coherence, especially for Minette, offers her a sense of belonging and

fulfillment, as well as her relationships with others. This is part of the cultural power she wanted to practice. This power is something she can resort to, when nothing else is there.

5. White Guilt

White guilt is the acknowledgement of unearned privileges, collectively or individually and white people's role in racism throughout the history of the United States. The feeling of white guilt could be created by the "awareness of this unearned White privilege along with the awareness of racism" (Swim 1999: 500). The term white guilt emerged in the 1960s when it "became so palpable you could see it on people" (Steele 1990: 497). White guilt influences people's reactions through diverse social and institutional practices. It is in this way that the two girls' relationship intertwines within the text. White guilt creates expectations and stereotyping and denies the uniqueness and individual differences in the novel. Minette is not allowed to establish herself as a non-racialized person and think of herself, first and foremost, as an individual, although not necessarily from unawareness of the privileges of white skin. Genna remains split and trapped between anguish and perverse thoughts towards Minette.

Max's manifestation of white guilt represents the consciousness of leftist elites. He constantly reminds Genna of his experiences and expresses the historical roots of prejudice in the United States, and sees his race as responsible for the historical disadvantage of black people. Max tries to prepare Genna to live in what he believes to be a racist society by directly discussing racism. This as he defines as commitment to freedom and egalitarian values as his cultural identity. His feeling is of shame, rather than guilt, "I would wish to stand outside the white race for I am ashamed of the white race" he says (Oates 2006: 166). This is from the sense of responsibility for others' racist attitudes or behavior. Likewise, seeking out ways to repair the failure through corrective action, one example would be his involvement in "Black Panther" Party. He has an anti-racist static identity and shows a moral objection to racism. For Max, the struggle is for the sake of the common good and the formation of citizens with a national identity and equal rights. However, his guilt surfaces to a keen sense of failure or disappointment and unjustifiably leads to detesting Christianity, its rituals, the country's history, and stereotyping all black Americans as victims.

For Genna, white guilt is more complex, and she shows different and multiple lines of logic to this concept. On the one hand, she, like her father, admits and is aware of the history of white privilege accumulated over generations and views herself and her family outside

such unearned privilege. This guilt shapes her daily experiences and the emotional consequences of her attitudes. Following this experience, Genna is flooded with emotions and sensations; at the opening of the novel, Genna says “I hated the possibility of being perceived as a spoiled, privileged white girl of my class” (Oates 2006: 9). Hence, Genna’s desperate attempt to fit in with Minette is an attempt to validate her own liberal goodness. Genna strives to protect herself against the deleterious psychological consequences of other students. Feeling of guilt seems not only to have transcended her race but pressured her toward selflessness, which is apparent in examples displaying her altruism. Readers feel her feelings to be genuine as she says, “but I try. I try, Daddy. 'I stand outside the white race'—you have said. I try so hard” (Oates 2006: 166). Guilt makes her generate as much self-preoccupation as concern for others and leads her to assume personal responsibility for dismantling prejudice. For example, when she “had shielded Minette from the racist drawing” (Oates 2006: 126) one can only interpret this as out of commitment to antiracism action. The nature of this preoccupation for her is always the redemption of innocence, the reestablishment of good feelings about herself.

On the other hand, the guilt-inducing situation causes internal discomfort and would make readers suspect of Genna’s intentions. Occasionally, Minnet’s rudeness or sarcasm of Schuyler College traditions reminds Genna of her racial identity which is part of her social identity, as it defines her self-concept and attachment to group membership: “for wasn't I *white*, and part of the joke? Or, since Minette was confiding in me, which Minette rarely did, maybe for the occasion I wasn't somehow *white*, and therefore privileged?” [Italic in original] (Oates 2006: 12). Minette’s attitude hinders her ability to differentiate between her sense of being White and her feeling of guilt. She, eventually, questions the unearned privilege offered to Minette, too. She ironically comments that Minette “was a Merit Scholar at Schuyler College, her parents would pay less than $500 for her academic year. Generva Meade had no scholarship, her parents would pay $4,000” (Oates 2006: 90). Perhaps being a student like Minette, she naturally forgets of the existence of inequality, and this might be mere jealousy. In fact, when the professor gave a second chance to Minette to revise her work, she confessed to having “felt a sting of envy” (Oates 2006: 98). This as she considers sharing the same interests and, to some extent, a common experience.

When selfishness and guilt are at work, Genna can no longer be concerned with authentic redemption. She would see herself as part of a racial group rather than an individual. This reality makes her ignore the circumstances of Minette; as a result, black disadvantages

become all but invisible to her. What is particularly problematic is that what started as a feeling and belief that all preferential treatment is insidious, and that skin color should not bring entitlement, grows into agreeing with other students that Minnet uses her skin as an advantage. Thus, Genna reaches a psychosocial space where her feeling of White guilt and self-blame is replaced by self-victimization.

6. Conclusion

The identities of Minnet and Genna are made from several intersectional spaces and contextual influences including memory, social expectations, religion, and White guilt. These dynamic structures upholding the society, all acting as catalyst of the past and present, have prominent roles to establish realities invisible to many readers. Readers feel a sense of disappointment to see Minette's contemptuous condescension toward the seemingly supportive environment and her failure to develop or understand her own identity within the cultural framework of the time. These dynamics and influences are carefully explored in this research to understand how the boundaries for Minnet and Genna are stratified, resulting in the crafting of these complex and highly conflicted characters. The discussions in this research contribute to the understanding of Minnet and Genna's psychosocial spaces of fear, anger, powerlessness, and hopelessness experienced while trying to establish both individual and shared group meanings and the boundaries of belonging.

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