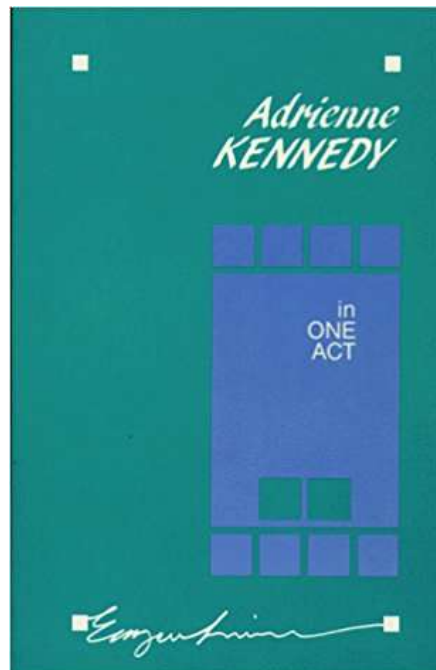


**Self from Selves -  
A Study of Adrienne Kennedy's Select One-Act Plays**

**Dr. Zulaiha Shakeel**

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Courtesy: <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/in-one-act>

**Abstract**

The title of the research paper is “Self from Selves: A Study of Adrienne Kennedy’s Select One-Act Plays.” The paper analyses the how African Americans had to overcome the hardships to survive, and during reconstruction too they continued to struggle to overcome the injustices and sufferings even as free men and women through the plays of Adrienne Kennedy. The paper also exhibits the role of Theatre as a reflection of the time, place, and social strata for the creators as well as for the audience being a heart throb of African culture which exposed its values.

The paper further studies the plays in terms of her attempt to locate herself from several selves and to connect to her Black counterpart and the Black cultural past. The research problem is based on the Black selves who are separated from their home and culture and are thrust into a totally alien environment by forced displacement and brutal enslavement. Africans were fragmented due to colonial power and influence. They had no option except to treat the trauma as a stepping stone to reconnect themselves with their past or by serving to link the Black families in America to its African counterpart. This is met in two levels – one is by reconnecting with their lost relatives and another with their past itself.

The main tool I have applied in my research is Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry as laid down in his "Of Mimicry and Man: An Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." The writings of all male and female Black writers reflect the progress of colonial relationship with a constant tension between the colonizer's desire to dominate and the history of the colonized.

### **Study of the Black Theatre**

During slavery, African Americans had to overcome many hardships to survive, and during reconstruction too they continued to struggle to overcome the injustices and sufferings even as free men and women. Former slaves drew the attention of the new generation of African Americans and inspired them to do the same. The first African American theatre was created by Brown in the year 1816-1817, which was the first professional theatre company in the city of New York. The study of the theatre cannot be limited to the study of theatre alone. The Theatre was a reflection of the time, place, and social strata for the creators as well as for the audience. The Black theatre was the heart throb of African culture which exposed its values.

### **Focus of This Paper**

The aim of this research is to study the plays of Adrienne Kennedy in terms of her attempt to locate herself from several selves and to connect to her Black counterpart and the Black cultural past. The research problem is based on the Black selves who are separated from their home and culture and are thrust into a totally alien environment by forced displacement and brutal enslavement. Africans were fragmented due to colonial power and influence. They had no option except to treat the trauma as a stepping stone to reconnect themselves with their past or by serving to link the Black families in America to its African counterpart. This is met in two levels – one is by reconnecting with their lost relatives and another with their past itself.

Kennedy, an African American woman playwright, arrived in New York City in the 1950s. Her writing was a "process of the transmutation of images." Her approach resulted in plays that combined expressionism and surrealism of African rituals. She herself states about her plays in her autobiography, *People Who Led to My Plays*: "My plays are meant to be states of mind" (126). The heroines were Black, "like myself" (13).

### **Concept of Mimicry**

The main tool I have applied in my research is Homi Bhabha's concept of *mimicry* as laid down in his "Of Mimicry and Man: An Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." The writings of all male and female Black writers reflect the progress of colonial relationship with a constant tension between the colonizer's desire to dominate and the history of the colonized.

The concept of Mimicry, according to Bhabha, is that the colonized in its process of mimicry, fail to realize that the Blacks are undermining the powerful systems enacted by the colonizer. They copy their system, culture, and way of life and prove them that they are hollow. Thus, colonialism results in irony, mimicry, and repetition. Hence mimicry is one of the effective strategies of the colonial power. But ironically, Bhabha illustrates that the colonized can use it to subvert the colonizer. So mimicry is a representation of an ironic compromise--at once resemblance and menace.

### **Adrienne Kennedy' Themes**

Kennedy's themes and characters are set against the conflict between their personal desires and social sanctions. The social conventions and restraints deeply suppress the desires and wishes of her characters. Under the overwhelming pressure of these conventions, the characters become ill or sick. This sickness is called neurosis which means mental illness that causes depression or abnormal

behavior. Hence, I have also used a bit of Freud's theory of Bi-Cameral mind, the duality of human mind, that is, the unconscious and the conscious mind which are based on pleasure principle (Eros) and reality principle (Thanatos). Multiple faces in one character have been dramatized through her command of narrative language. Changing costume is a symbolic representation of changing personalities.

Clara in *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* struggles with questions like "Who am I, who do I speak for, what do people see when they see me, who do they say I am, and am I Black or White?" (64) These selves have been projected through the three stars – Bette Davis, Jean Peters, and Shelley Winters. She also expresses herself through her own self as "Clara." Her husband Eddie accuses her of being "a spectator watching her life like watching a black movie. . . (75) She thinks sometimes . . . to me my life is one of my black and white movies that I love so much . . .with me playing a bit part" (75). Self-representation became an imitation for the characters of Kennedy. I substantiate it through Bhabha's words:

The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (Bhabha 382).

So, mimicking the White is dangerous or possibly harmful for Black.



Adrienne Kennedy

Courtesy: [http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/adrienne\\_kennedy.html](http://clevelandartsprize.org/awardees/adrienne_kennedy.html)

### **Adrienne Kennedy's Characters**

Kennedy's characters are often hallucinatory and psychopathic. Sarah in *Funnyhouse* is one of the best examples of this kind. There are eight characters in the play and nine including the author, Kennedy. But five characters are the selves of Sarah.

NEGRO – SARAH

DUCHESS OF HAPSBURG One of herself

QUEEN VICTORIA REGINA One of herself

JESUS One of herself

PATRICE LUMUMBA One of herself

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SARAH'S LANDLADY Funnyhouse Lady  
RAYMOND Funnyhouse man  
THE MOTHER (*Funnyhouse* 11)

She speaks through several voices, being a product of this unholy union. Kennedy digs into the sick mind of Sarah who cannot bear becoming a Black child and be proud in accepting the patronage of White.

Bhabha's observation of this state of Sarah in the White world of Colonial power:

What I have called mimicry is not the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification so that, as Fanon has observed, the black stops being an actional person for only the white man can represent his self-esteem. The *menace* of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourses also disrupts its authority. And it is a double-vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object. (Bhabha 383)

Black cannot act as Black anymore. They represent only through White to maintain their self-esteem. The colonized are thinking of saving their esteem by showing them through the face of the White.

### **Making Self into Selves**

Kennedy exhibits clearly to the audiences that both psychic pleasure and cultural question are the sources of making self into selves in all her plays. They cross the boundaries of the culture of enunciation through a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning. For each of these instances of 'a difference that is almost the same but not quite' inadvertently creates a crisis for the cultural priority given to the metaphoric as the process of repression and substitution which negotiates the difference between paradigmatic systems and classifications.

### **Mimicry, Camouflage and the Other**

A related reference to Lacan's concept of mimicry is made. To him "Mimicry is a camouflage" (385). "Camouflage" is a concealed identity. Africans can only disguise and not become the same. It is not a coordinating concept. This is a form of resemblance that differs and defends. Because, it can be displayed only in part. It arises from the discriminatory identity effects. The mere act has no essence. It has no "itself."

A strong discourse on post-colonialism has been created to strengthen the "other" with its discursive process of resistance. The construction of "America" – "them" of colonialism is necessary for the affirmation of "Africa" – "us" of the post colonialism. This chapter aims at African's deliberation to travel back to the original root of Africa, through the roots, the same route they travelled from. Their original identity is distorted because of the expedition of identities. The chapter also recollects the colonial condition, to go back to their pre-colonial condition.

### **Tragic Mulatta**

To this state is the "tragic mulatta" an archetypical mixed-race person (called a "mulatta,") who is assumed to be sad, or even suicidal, because he fails to completely fit in the "White World" or the "Black World. Adriene She shows the self in dialogue not only with society, but also with the

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fragmentary trace of otherness that is disappearing or no longer exists within the self. Thus, Adriene Kennedy creates a landscape of her own psyche in which the ongoing battle between conflicting discourses and mythologies are made manifest through symbols, composite characters, and a plurality of voices, all of which reveal the violent struggle between whiteness and blackness within as well as outside the self.

As a result, Adriene Kennedy's writing disturbs the accepted double, Black-White construction of race appears to the usually disregarded history of racial mixing as the characterized North American life. Kennedy depicts her characters such as the "tragic mulatto" as the victim in a society divided by race, where there is no place for one who is neither completely "Black" nor "White."

### ***The Owl Answers***

In *The Owl Answers*, the character She takes a trip to London to see her White father's ancestors, but she was not allowed to see her dead father and attend his funeral. Hence, she fantasizes visiting England with her father and claims White culture as hers. This character is more obsessed with finding her father and claiming his heritage as her own. She's identity is bound to her father's identity. She claims the Richest White man in the society as her father. And when he died in England She pleads that, "I'm almost White, am I not? Let me into St. Paul's Chapel. Let me please go down... I am his daughter" (31-32). It is a legacy of her claim to be accepted by the White. It is crucial to emphasize that She is not solely Black; but she is a mulatta.

The characters may look Black, they may look White, but the history of their country is overpoweringly a history of racial mixing. Kennedy's disastrous mulattas teach us that perhaps America's greatest tragedy is their collective renunciation of this fact, and their determined refusal to erase or at least blur the colour line, to admit and escalate the variety of their shared ancestries.

### **Reconnection of the Self**

Reconnection of the self is the main theme of the Black writers who belong to African community and whether they like to belong to the community or not. Kennedy's characters exhibit how by going back to multiple roots they can get themselves connected to the original root.

Every Black writer is a product and part of the Black community, whether he likes it or not. Their role must be addressed only to that community from which they come. This is substantiated through Patricia Waugh's theory that denotes, how the focus shifts towards an emphasis on relativity, and a receptiveness to ideas of 'difference', plurality, fragmentation, non-totality, aesthetic self-astonishing, contingency and 'language games.'

The Black finally finds solace in connecting to their community. Through that relativity they become receptive to the ideas of difference, plurality and fragmentation. Fragmentation leads to non-totality of their community. The power of language builds the "power" of "White" so "powerful." Being away from home, they are linked across horizon and as a "whole" they are connected to the world. Hence through fragmentation, they try to reconnect themselves to their past, culture, religion, and land. When they reconnect to their past, the characters try to voice their thoughts out through White characters since the voice of the White is powerful, and for them they want it to reach the world through the voice of opposite culture. They use it as a weapon to establish their identity. And once it is heard, the voice will be muted, and the original voice with its meaning will spell out to reach its height of goal.

### **White Stars, Black Roles**

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Another powerful realization of Adrienne Kennedy's wish by making the White stars staring the Black roles is that she could make the White stars perform the Black roles thus, becoming the members of the Black family. Hence Kennedy dismantles the principles of identity at the foundation of dominant White culture. The author turns the tables of colonialism by this unique attempt. For her, it is the time for the White world to imitate the Black one.

She tries to reconnect the fragmented selves and focuses more on the struggle for reconnection, reunification, and reorientation. The characters of Kennedy eagerly search their lost identity and dignity. They come to a stage to revolt against White masters with their bond, sense of unification, and strength.

This research paper has elaborated on how the Blacks are fragmented because of subjugation and slavery and their attempt to identify roots, to reach culture and home together. It suggests strongly how they reconnect themselves with their counterparts, as a solution to the Black oppression. The study also traces the evolution of Adrienne Kennedy as a unique dramatist and her commitment to her ideals of Black liberation, her revolutionary thinking and action, and her belief in the moral and social rebirth of Black Americans.

For them spirituality is not heaven but freedom, "a non –slave holding state," where they can be reunited and reconnected with their fragmented kinship. They plan to run out of the jaw of slavery into the land of freedom.

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