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Resistance through Parody and Humour: a Study of George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*

Jyoti Puri, M.A. (Gold Medalist), M.Phil. in English



Postmodernism for postmodernism, politics for politics,
I'd rather be an ironist than a terrorist (Suleiman 197).

Focus of This Paper

The present research paper discusses the theme of resistance against racial oppression and shows how parody and humour are used as theoretical, theatrical

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strategies and practical tools to deal with some of the socio-political problems. George Costello Wolfe is a renowned African-American playwright, director and producer.

Wolfe's works overtly deal with the continuing presence of racial discrimination in the United States. His significant play, *The Colored Museum* (1985) has been selected for analysis in the discussion.



George C. Wolfe

Courtesy: http://siyanor.com/495_George-C-Wolfe/

Wolfe has won an Obie Award and two Tony Awards for some of his best directed plays like *Spunk*, Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, *Bring in 'da Noise/Bring in 'da Funk*. From 1993 to 2004, Wolfe has served as artistic director and producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater. Wolfe also directed Suzan-Lori Parks' Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog*. He has also directed a new translation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* ("George C. Wolfe" Wikipedia). As a director, Wolfe believes that parody is a literary device that helps its characters and the audience

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to actively contribute in the making of the social discourse called theatre. Linda Hutcheon in her text, *A Theory of Parody* (1985) says, 'Brecht's dramatic technique of distance and critical analysis, Verfremdungseffekt is quite similar in its approach to parody. It is so because both the techniques heavily rely on the audience's knowledge and critique of the subject matter' (92).

Humour, Irony, Satire and Parody

G. C. Wolfe uses resistance, humour, irony and satire to register a note of protest against the unequal power relations in the U.S. Wolfe's plays manifest resistance practices that cannot be seen as organized collective movement aiming at an ideal state of affairs. But his plays are a mode of intervention, political and aesthetic, into a world that sought to subjectively define a fixed identity of the African-Americans.

For centuries parody has been a significant style and genre of literature. "In Aristotle's *Poetics* (ii. 5) Hegemon of Thasos was the inventor of a kind of parody by slightly altering the wording in well-known poems he transformed the sublime into the ridiculous" ("Parody"). In ancient Greek literature, a *parodia* was a narrative poem imitating the style and prosody of epics, "but treating light, satirical or mock-heroic subjects" ("Parody").

Margaret Rose defines parody as, "comic refunctioning performed on linguistic or artistic material" (Mikkonen 5). Similarly, Rossen-Knill and Henry argue that, "parody re-presents the object and then flaunts that re-presentation in order to criticize the object in a humorous way" (Mikkonen 5). Parody is also used to pay tribute to the target but it is more used for protest purposes. As aptly conveyed by Röhrich and quoted in Mikkonen:

Parodies are determined by the negative tendency

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towards the transmitted text. They have a tendency towards opposition. A protest is made against that which has been transmitted. Boredom, satiation, or lack of belief unburden themselves in laughter (5).

According to Linda Hutcheon, “parody and satire are *genres*, or forms of expression, while irony refers to a *rhetorical tactic* that both forms often utilize” (6). Like parody, satire is also highly critical, satire ridicules, “the vices and follies of humanity, with an eye to their correction” (6). Generally, parodies are satirical in tone and offer critical social commentary on a wider scale.

Hutcheon in her essay, “Politics of Postmodernism” writes that parody should not be seen as, “ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions. . .” (185). Rather parody should be understood as, “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (185). Through parody there is a constant process of adaptation, subversion and re-inscription of dominant discourses by individuals.

Portrayal of Multi-faceted Forms of Oppression – Use of Bathos

The play, *The Colored Museum* has been written and performed with a playful rejection of the conventional anti-racist plays. In contrast to the usual African-American playwriting where the race is presented as a victim of various forms of subalternism, this play wittily and humorously criticizes the centuries old colonialism of the black community by parodying inhuman practices like slavery. The play demonstrates oppression’s multi-faceted forms – economic, cultural, lingual, psychological, physical and political.

By taking the alternative path of comedy and bathos, Wolfe hits in two directions at the same time; he deconstructs the discourse of African-American playwriting that could turn into a closed structure, as he touches the serious subject of continued forms of oppressions in the contemporary world.

The Colored Museum was premiered in 1986 and it won Wolfe the Dramatists Guild Award. A televised version of the play appeared on PBS-TV's "Great Performances" in 1991. Many critics viewed the playwright's work as anti-black because of the satiric and parodying tone of its contents. There is bitter irony and mockery that ridicule and question the inhuman practices of slavery and the forceful migration of the African-Americans in the historic journey of the 'middle passage'. The play does more by showing the repercussions of the oppression on the black community – mimicry of the non-blacks, economic depravity and cultural annihilation. However, it is not only the political issues that are parodied in the text. (Keene "George C. Wolfe: A Brief Biography" 593 and Gordon "Humour in African-American Discourse" 260).

Eleven Stories

The play is a satirical exhibit of eleven stories that illuminate the past and contemporary race relations in America. "Git on Board" is the first exhibit that has Miss Pat, an intentionally created dumb flight attendant as the commentator. She mocks at the confinement of the black slaves who are forcibly taken through the 'middle passage'. Miss Pat is, "black, pert and cute. She has a flip to her hair and wears a hot pink mini-skirt stewardess uniform" (*The Colored Museum* 1). She appears to be a parodied self of the figure of Jezebel (the seductive temptress) the usual black, fashionable and mindless air hostesses that are projected everywhere in films and T. V shows. She welcomes her

passengers aboard by saying, “Celebrity Slaveship, departing the Gold Coast and making short stops at Bahia, Port Au Prince, and Havana (1)”

The Journey of the Audience

The audience experiences the journey across, “the middle passage” by, “wearing their shackles at all times” (1). She says, “Please refrain from call-and-response singing as that sort of thing can lead to rebellion. And, of course, no drums are allowed on board” (2). Miss Pat proceeds to single out individual passengers/ audience members and in a prophetic tone telling them that they would have to work in cotton fields, suffer for a few hundred years and from this pain will come, “a culture so complex” (3). She directs them, “on your right you will see the American Revolution, on your left, the Civil war . . . and now we’re passing over the Great Depression . . . That was World War I not to be confused with World War II, the Korean or the Vietnam War, all of which you will play a major role in” (5). The exhibit ends when the passengers’ luggage begins to revolve onstage from offstage left. Along with the luggage are two males and a woman slave with I.Ds fastened around their necks.

Cookin’ with Aunt Ethel

In the second exhibit, “Cookin’ with Aunt Ethel” the slave passengers are greeted by Aunt Ethel, a satiric presentation of the cooking show chefs. She wears a bandana and stirs up a mysterious batch of, “colored cuisine” (7) in her big black kettle. Her ironic method of teaching evokes laughter as she, “explores the magic and mysteries” and comments, “I’m not gonna tell you what it is till after you done cooked it” (7). The ingredients are highly meaningful, “a heap of survival and humility, just a touch and some attitude” in order to have, “baked yourself a batch of negroes” (8).

In the article, “The Satirical Self”, Wyatt Mason (2006) has highlighted the prevalence of parody and satire in contemporary consumer culture suggesting media trends. Mason writes:

For the tools of satire, the sharp knives of sarcasm and the pointy shivs of irony and the toy hammer of lampoon are being wielded with widespread enthusiasm, and not merely by cunning builders of satirical speeches and stories. Rather, they are being lent to us all, to enable every possible construction.

The Photo Session

The third exhibit, “The Photo Session” ironically reveals a glamorous and gorgeous black couple wearing the best of everything and perfect smiles. The educated, employed and nouveau rich man and his wife, “live inside *Ebony Magazine*” (9). The background music, “we are fabulous” adds artificial zest to the consumerism and instills fake confidence in the middle class that ends up spending more than their needs. They reveal the actual lives of the celebrities who live more in the pictures than in their homes. The couple says, “We live inside a world where everyone is beautiful, and wears fabulous clothes” (9). The most touching line comes when the guy says, “everything is rehearsed including this other kind of pain we’re starting to feel” (10). The weary couple offers solution to the contradictions of everyday life by offering the audience to become lifeless like them and “smile/click, smile/click for no pain” (10).

A Soldier with a Secret

The fourth exhibit is, “A Soldier with a Secret”. The stage walls project the faces of black soldiers – from the Spanish-American through to the Vietnam War. The protagonist is, “Junie Robinson, a black combat soldier, posed on an onyx plinth. He

comes to life and smiles at the audience”(11). Junie appears to be a parodied version of Gabriel Maxson in August Wilson’s *Fences* who was wounded in World War II and had a metal plate installed in his head. Because of his head injury, Gabriel thought he is his own Biblical namesake – the archangel Gabriel himself. In “A Soldier with a Secret” Junie is a character that was terribly hurt in a war explosion. On getting injured, he ironically feels that he should, “expectin’ to see white clouds, Jesus, and my Mama, only all I saw was more war” (11). He thinks he has come back to life because he has a philanthropist mission like that of Jesus who went about, “healin’ the sick, the hurtin’ all these colored boys wearin from the war” (13). Through Junie, Wolfe lays bare the hegemony that instills false confidence in the black soldiers who are made sacrificial lambs in the war fields and afterwards lead a terrible life without any governmental assistance.

The Gospel According to Miss Roj

“The Gospel According to Miss Roj” is the fifth exhibit that shows a transgender character Miss Roj who appears in striped patio pants, white go-go boots, a halter top and, and cat-shaped sunglasses. She is full of arrogance and says, “God created black people and black people created style” (14). Miss Roj is assertive and unabashed, she says, “I ain’t just your regular oppressed American Negro. No-no-no! I am an extra-terrestrial” (15). The character seems to be the reincarnation of the 1970s T.V anchor Flip Wilson's woman role of Geraldine Jones, Miss Roj’s character too allows her to enter a space that is fluid, abstract and therefore opens possibilities of critiquing the conventional and socially acceptable gender roles.

The Hairpiece

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“The Hairpiece” is the sixth exhibit that aptly captures the dilemma of the young African-American girls who are convinced into believing that the white women’s hair texture and skin color are the parameters against which their beauty should be measured. The African-American girls want their hair to become smooth hair by undergoing extensive and expensive hair re-do’s (not treatment). In this part, two hairpieces; Janine –an Afro wig and La Wanda – the long, flowing wig come to life and fight for the possession of a black woman’s bald head who has, “done fried, dyed, de-chemicalized her shit to death” (19). Janine ridicules the protagonist, the Woman’s style of living - who has been a fool according to them and a, “political quick-change artist. Everytime the nigga went and changed his ideology, she went and changed her hair to fit the occasion” (20).

The Last Mama-on-the-Couch - Parody of a Celebrated African-American Play

Wolfe parodies one of the most celebrated African-American plays, Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun* in the seventh exhibit, “The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play”. Other works that have been parodied are Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf*. “The Last Mama-on-the-Couch” play is explained by its narrator as, “a searing domestic drama that tears at the very fabric of racist America” (24). A world-weary Mama clutches her Bible and tells her angry 30-year-old son Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones whose, “brow is heavy from three hundred years of oppression” to let God settle his grievances with “The Man” (24).

The play has a moment where the narrator consciously interrupts the progress of the plot and ceremoniously gives an award to Mama for her performance. Mama appears

to be the parody of the black woman stereotype, Aunt Jemima (the sexless, long-suffering nurturer, the black nanny on the southern plantation). Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones' wife, Lady is described as, "a creature of regal beauty who in ancient times graced the temples of the Nile" (26). Mama's daughter Medea, is a character who has, "escaped from a Greek tragedy" (27). Her dialogue ridicules the epic convention of lofty language. She tells her brother, "if with your thoughts and words we could cast thine oppressors into the lowest bowels of wretched hell, would that make us like the gods or more like our oppressors" (28).

The ending of *A Raisin in the Sun* is celebratory because the Youngers decide to make an English neighbourhood (Clybourne Park) their home. Walter rises in audience's estimate by refusing Mr. Linder's money and defeating his racist intentions. In this exhibit, Walter commits suicide because he "has been committed for overacting" (29). This part ends when the dead Walter and everyone around him, "get up, sing and dance" (31).

Symbiosis

"Symbiosis" is the eighth exhibit. It has two characters, a Black Man and The Kid. The Black Man is wearing an executive's office dress and is seen standing before a large trash can. In contrast, The Kid is dressed in a late-sixties street style. The Black Man with contained emotions confesses about his loss of, "first pair of Afro-comb, first dashiki, autographed pictures of Jomo Kenyatta, first can of Afro-sheen, first box of curl relaxer and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*" (33). The Kid is horrified at the loss and the Man tells him that, "anything and everything that connects me to you, to who I was, to what we were, is out of my life" (34). The Man tells the Kid that mere clinging to

African roots is not enough for survival as, “the climate is changing, and either you adjust or you end up extinct, a sociological dinosaur” (34).

A scuffle follows between the representatives of the two generations. At first, the Kid emerges victorious who shouts, “Jai! Jai! Jai!”. These words in the Hindi language mean a glorious victory. Soon, The Man denounces his community’s painful history as he feels, “Being black is too emotionally taxing; therefore I will be black only on the weekends and holidays” (36). At the end, the Kid fetches the Man from inside the trash can, and he smilingly emerges from the can saying, “What’s happenin’?” (37).

“Lala’s Opening” is the ninth exhibit and it has echoes of August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. In this part, Lala Lamazing Grace is a big singing star who talks about her fame in Rome, Rangoon, Paris, Prague, France. She has with her, “overweight black maid Admonia and her white masked lover, Flo’rance” (41). Upon discovering Flo’rance’s betrayal she stabs him and re-phrases Ophelia’s (*Hamlet*) feelings, “Love can drive a woman to madness, to pain and sadness” (42).

Permutations

“Permutations” is the tenth exhibit and it has Normal Jean Reynolds as a southern/country young girl who sits with her dress covering, “a white egg” laying between her legs. Normal had relations with a garbage collector and his character seems to have been drawn from August Wilson’s character of Troy Maxson in the *Fences*. In *Fences*, Troy develops an illicit affair with Alberta and she gives birth to their daughter. In “Permutations”, Normal also wants to give birth to her “bunch of babies”. (49+) She is too young to understand her situation and rather lives in an unreal world where she hopes for her babies to transcend the mundane realities and she tells the infants to, “Fly! Fly! Fly! Fly” (49), and escape from the human world.

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The Party

The last exhibit, “The Party” has madness as a strong theme. Topsy Wasington who loves to party, makes fun of the Sabbath narrative by commenting, “when God created the world, on the seventh day, he didn’t rest. No child, he P-A-R-T-I-E-D” (50). Topsy has attended a gathering where she saw Malcolm X discussing existentialism, Nat Turner, Bert Williams, Aunt Jemima and Angela Davies. Topsy narrates the events of the party by inventing her own ideas about the distinguished gathering. She says that when the party gained momentum, “the whole place just took off and went flying through space –defying logic and limitations” (51). This exhibit shows many characters from previous exhibits turned into sculptures like: Lala, The Man, Miss Roj, and Miss Pat. They sing and everything turns to a vocal and visual cacophony when Topsy yells at them and directs them to be quiet. Topsy has the final word by saying that her power lies in her, “colored contradictions” (53), and that she does not want to resolve them as they give meaning to her life.

Wolfe’s Worldview

What emerges from Wolfe’s writing is that he does not perceive playwriting as a neutral and apolitical activity. His characters are created with a thought provoking sense of being what they present or parody. Wolfe has also mentioned that, “[He] tries to write characters with an outrageous sense of [his] self because in their presence, they’re the opposite of oppressed” (*Jelly’s Last Jam* x). As an African-American playwright, Wolfe writes as a representative of his race and he believes that:

People carry their power, arrogance, humility, anger and
passion with them all the time because they didn’t have

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time to pack the first time around. So that the next time,
if somebody tries to take it away, they'll have it
all with them (Jelly's Last Jam x).

Permeable Nature of Ideology

A contemporary critic, Slavoj Žižek has written about the permeable nature of ideology and the difficulties associated with contesting the deep imbedded ideological structures of power. Žižek says any attempts made to understand the contemporary era as a state of “post-ideological” condition are irrelevant. He says, “this denial only provides the ultimate proof that we are more than ever embedded in ideology”:

On account of its all-pervasiveness, ideology appears as its own
opposite, as non-ideology, as the core of our human identity
underneath all ideological labels (Žižek 39).

Post-modernist Parody

Wolfe has a distinct and foreseeable goal and it involves an absolute erasure – of constructed signification attached to African-Americans and of the ‘given’ and hierarchical order of identities. *The Colored Museum* addresses the issue of oppression as well as the literary resistance and response to it. According to Linda Hutcheon:

The paradox of postmodernist parody is that
it is *not* essentially depthless, trivial kitsch, as

Eagleton and Jameson both believe, but rather that it can
and does lead to a vision of interconnectedness (“The Politics” 182).

Fredric Jameson’s argument about parody in postmodernism is that, “parody finds itself without a vocation” (Jameson 65). To which Hutcheon argues that, “there is

absolutely nothing random or without principle in the parodic recall and re-examination of the past . . . to include irony and play is never necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose in postmodernist art” (Hutcheon “The Politics” 186).

Postmodernist parody has been lately and extensively felt in architecture, literature, painting, film, or music. Inversion and intervention appear to be its basic features and it is with such qualities that Linda Hutcheon considers parody, “to have become the mode of the marginalized or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology” (“The Politics” 206). She further suggests that parody has the potential to become a counter strategy for, “black, ethnic, and feminist artists” who must resist, “the predominantly white, Anglo, male culture in which they find themselves” (206).

Parody evokes humor through a constructive and playful reworking of the target. Resistance also emerges from the parodic treatment of the object or situation. The non-serious tone sets the ball rolling by setting a space where critical analysis of the social discourses and forms can be done without any severe opposition.

Although funny on the surface, *The Colored Museum* attempts to engross black and white audiences as witnesses, accomplices and participants in the proceedings. This play offers us exhibits so that black people are not only seen as victims of history but seen as a people who are responsible for and capable of defining their own future without having to deny their past.

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