

IDENTITY THROUGH CULTURAL MULTIPLICITY AS REFLECTED IN MIDDLE PASSAGE

Yildiray Cevik

International Balkan University, Skopje, Macedonia

Abstract: Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* includes the forms of identity and culture by disclosing differences and dualism and displays a basic spiritual set up in the African and American cultural legacy. Johnson provides the crossroads of consciousness and experience, the history of identity as a "middle" experience of the African American. He treats *Middle Passage* as the source of a refugee from the unknown roots bringing the subject to the marginalization of identity crisis in a mixed culture. The "middle" passage can be seen as the ontological and epistemological material that gets locked out of binary oppositions and dualism, or the matter of experience and consciousness, which could also be the definition of "identity" as depicted in the novel. The novel emphasizes racial identity as a process that makes comment on the culture that encircles it. Thus, in the analysis of the novel from the cultural perspective, it is required to consider the cultural opposition, not wholly on the other, but settled down into cultural multiplicity and versatility. The problem of identity is a focus in the novel; yet, it is left complicated. In this perspective, the study attempts to investigate identity within relevant culture through crossroads in response to, against and across the parameters of gender, race, history and social rank.

Keywords: identity, culture, awareness, hybrid, marginalization, dualism

INTRODUCTION

As representations of African American culture in past and contemporary literature present its self through revealing disparities, Charles Johnson writes on a basic foundation, derived from a clear view that permits readers to visualize the power of African American cultural past. Johnson reflects his spiritual belief in Buddhist teaching in the composition of his novel *Middle Passage* (1985) and creates his protagonist Rutherford Calhoun, who transforms his identity through the cultural heritage of Taoism and the conflicts of African American culture. Johnson designs the protagonist not only as a Taoist pilgrim in quest of identity, but an organizer of an adopted African American way of belief. Worthy states, "he depicts the adoption with Calhoun's experimental augmentation of the three principles of Taoism as compassion, simplicity and modesty" (1).

As is described in history, the Middle Passage is an infamous route of the ships that carried slaves to the

Americas. After the arrival to the New World, the slaves were sold or exchanged for the valuable goods. The term 'middle passage' might sound somewhat romantic, but in reality it stands as one of the most terrible events in history.

It is the passage of the bounded slaves from West Africa to the Americas. In the beginning there was a trade between Europeans and African leaders who sold their enemies and disabled people in exchange for unique gifts such as guns, tobacco, iron bars; but, at later stages of slavery, Europeans kidnapped Africans at the coastal areas of Western African and then sent to ships that sailed them to the New World where this new work force was needed to help stabilize the new nation (<http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=37900>).

The Middle Passage took about ninety days. However, there were times when few months were needed to transport Africans. During the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, Africans were treated terribly. On the ship African slaves were crammed like sardines and chained together. In addition, Africans had to endure the terrible heat.

There was little or no food provided. They were subjected to diseases that quickly spread among slaves, and many died due to unsanitary conditions. Most of the time, the sick were thrown overboard to avoid infecting others. In the voyage, one of every three Africans died from dysentery, smallpox, or suffocation and was thrown overboard to the sharks, who reportedly followed the slave ships from the coast of Africa all the way to the new World (<https://goo.gl/gB8DYR>).

Rutherford Calhoun, the first person narrator of *Middle Passage*, is a unique and complicated protagonist. He is both a philosopher and a trickster. His origins are in rural Illinois, but he is adapted to the excitement of New Orleans. When his gambling debts and Isadora, a woman

determined to marry him, force him to escape New Orleans and stow away on the *Republic*, a slave ship, he adapts quickly to the vicissitudes of sailor's life (Scott, 647). Thieving and lying become a stock for him that betrays his position as a "middleman" – neither European nor African, neither American nor anything else. The crew perceives him as neither a trickster nor a shyster.

"... Calhoun will go on his way, like he's always done, believing in nothing, belonging to nobody, drifting here and there and dying, probably, in a ditch without so much as leaving a mark on the world – or as much of a mark as you get from writing on water" (88).

Johnson links Rutherford's thieving with the status of the African American – "theft, if the truth be told, was the closest thing I knew to transcendence" (46) – and resolves this criminality once Rutherford's existence has undergone the tests of confrontation, reflection, and fashions these transitions and transformations into a text that, like its thief or liar narrator, appropriates and wanders through the storehouse of culture, looking for itself:

... I felt culturally dizzy, so displaced by this decentred inferior and the African's takeover, that when I lifted a whale oil lamp at my heels it might as well have been a Phoenician artefact for all the sense it made to me. Yet in the smoking debris, there was movement, a feeble stirring of Icarian man, the creator of cogs and cotton gins, beneath contraptions that pitched him to the splintery floor (142-43).

As an example of other naval experiences, *Middle Passage* functions in the scope of allegory, the ship being the mouth that speaks to Calhoun, "... a society, a commonwealth". The name of the ship, the Republic, and the fact that its captain was born on July 4, 1776, are strong suggestions that the society allegorized is

that of the United States. The novel touches on many themes from US history, including slavery, equal opportunity, and race riots. Many of these references are anachronistic, that is, they are themes and issues that did not exist in 1830. While it is difficult to explain how a narrator writing in the nineteenth century could have knowledge of some of the events, Jonson seems to be suggesting the interconnectedness of US history. In other words, the slavery of the country's early days and the civil strife that Falcon foresees in his apocalyptic death dream are connected in their origins (O'Keefe, 637). In this regard, the fact that the Republic is a ship constantly coming apart suggests that the US is a society in the process, undergoing constant upheaval and renewal. Following the beliefs of its captain, the shipboard society is governed by an essential dualism and characterized by deep fissure that requires slavery and strife.

We see the beginning of Calhoun's evolving within Taoism through his grasp of compassion. Calhoun's understanding of compassion assumes a body while aboard the slave ship the Republic. After the detaining of the Allmuseri, an African tribe believed to possess physical and psychological deformities, Calhoun associates himself the blend of 'other'. As sickness from vomit and death from infection get widespread through the confines of sleeping quarters of the ship, Calhoun has to discharge the corpse of a slave over the board. Worthy states in his article:

While Ngonyma, an enslaved Allmuseri and Meadows, a deckhand of the Republic, bring the corpse from the bowels of the ship for a quick toss overboard, Calhoun grabs the body and describes the figure not as ruined cargo, but as a mutilated human, divorced of happiness and life by the conditions on the Republic (3).

In connection with Calhoun's compassion for the dead body, Calhoun is engulfed in sympathy towards the ravaged being. He says:

He was close to my own age, perhaps had been torn from a lass as lovely as, lately, I now saw Isadora to be, and from a brother as troublesome as my own. His eyes were unalive, mere kernel of muscle, though I still found myself poised vertiginously on their edge, falling through these dead holes deeper into the empty hulk he had become, as if his spirit had flown and mine was being sucked there in its place (123).

In his article, O'Keefe makes an assertion that aids in understanding Calhoun's experience. He writes, "In a moment of identification with the dead, Rutherford learns a new "way of seeing" the Allmuseri culture: He seems to recognize the reciprocal, inter subjective nature of experience" (673). Worthy underlines that O'Keefe's suggestion and Calhoun's assertion, we see that Calhoun no longer remarks on the decay of the body. In the midst of the experience and empirical senses, he removes himself from the deck of the ship and possesses the identity of the fallen tribesman. In his remark about the similarity with the age, Calhoun shows compassion, sympathy that overcomes the ravaged body in his arms. Being able to dissociate himself from the slave's body and enter into a love interest as his Isadora and familial strains through disappointing brother, Calhoun retains the compassion he lived through in the face of the boy's blemished past.

Calhoun gets the realization through the metaphorical entering into the boy's appearance and delves into the horrific past of the boy's experience on the ship. After Calhoun and Meadows swing the body to the sharks, Calhoun's grip of the body's flesh causes

a “dark and porous piece of flesh” to fall into his hands (123). On this point Calhoun remarks:

My stained hand still tingled. Of a sudden, it no longer felt like my own. Something in me said it would never be clean again, no matter how often I scrubbed it or with stinging chemicals, and without thinking I found my left hand lifting the knife from my waist, then using the blade to scrape the boy’s moist, black flesh off my palm (123).

Calhoun underlines the impossibility of removing clearing the stain, and Johnson implies the slavery imprints the colour of blood in the US history. In this way, innocence is killed through the slavery.

In the transformation of the identity, Johnson builds a deeper manner of viewing life through African American experiences. On this point, O’Keefe puts forward “Johnson seeks new ways of seeing and deeper clarification of what we think we already know” (635). In showing deeper clarification in African American experiences, Calhoun creates African American experiential Taoism through African American perspective of compassion when confronted with horrors of race. Through compassion, and Calhoun’s evolution of Taoism in the realization of simplicity of life, after the Allmuseri gets the control of the Republic by freeing themselves from their chains, further disease spreads throughout the ship with the deaths of the African victims. Even in this condensation of the infected bodies, Calhoun finds the peace that calms and produces kindness in the midst of chaos. He remarks: “the first thing I was forced to do was forget my personal cares, my pains, and my hopes before repairing to the deckhouse where the sufferers were sprawled. I placed my hand on each of their foreheads and listened” (161). Calhoun shows with

this statement that amongst the uncertainty of life from the Allmuseri and disease, he escapes within himself, locating a peace that divorces from the limitations of perceiving his surroundings as a reflection of his internal wellbeing. In his article Scott sheds light on Calhoun’s emotional transformation: “Calhoun evolves from unreflective lassitude to an awareness that enables him to cross the ‘countless seas of suffering’ forgetful of himself” (645). We see Calhoun’s desire to delve into past and the needs of others to display emotions to the destroyed children, whom he calms into eternal rest with whisperings of “all will be well”. Calhoun displays his personal and spiritual transformation through words: “If you had known me in Makanda or New Orleans, you would have known that I doubted whether I truly had anything to offer others” (162). So Calhoun underlines that through reinterpreting simplicity through and African American perspective, he transforms away from his past self into an identity that speaks to his evolving new identity.

Calhoun enters his religion’s afterlife at the conclusion of *Middle Passage*. After his rescue by Captain from the waters of the Atlantic, Calhoun realizes that Isadora is travelling on the same ship (186). While he learns that Isadora is in the process of marrying Papa, A New Orleans thug, he interrupts the ceremony by engaging in a scuffle with Papa’s body guard. When Calhoun deals with Papa about his capture of the Allmuseri, Papa accepts to cut his connection to Isadora, making Calhoun to marry Isadora. When Calhoun meets her, he conveys the events he has lived through his experiences on the Republic and says, “what she and I wanted most after so many adventures was the incandescence, and of

embrace that would outlast the Atlantic's bone-chilling cold" (209). With his citation, we see Calhoun metaphorically dies by expressing no interest in reclaiming his past behaviours before stepping into the Republic and with his aspiration to simply lie with Isadora in an eternal embrace. In this moment, C. Johnson shows us that Calhoun has found the way by experiencing and understanding the complex histories of Africans and African Americans. Thus, the state of getting ultimate knowledge in the past with the inability to experience the future becomes the home of Calhoun's identity and soul.

In *Middle Passage*, Johnson depicts Calhoun's creation of an African American experiential transformation of identity to issue "further ways of understanding the depths and history of the spirituality in individuals who trace their heritage to Africa". In the intersection of race and spirituality that transforms the identity, Scott writes: "It exposes the roots of human being, complications of African-American experience, and the position that writing occupies in relating experience, enacting consciousness, and performing its won self-consciousness" (645). Johnson crafts the intricacies of African American experience and reinscribes African American culture and history through spirituality that the protagonist plans and reshapes preconceived notions of African American experience and history. The author cites spirituality through a distinct African American adoption and recreation of Taoism that helps to show the intimate trans historical connection between African American history and spirituality.

In the quest for identity through cultural duplicity, the race has implications in *Middle Passage* for the whole realm of human and literary identity. In the

construction of identity, race is deeply involved with the cultural values dualistic thought has attached to racial difference. The race has a potential in the perception of Johnson's point of departure. Race spans across the entire novel as corporal entity, cultural source and textual foundation (Scott, 651). Rutherford, "a fatherless child" (126) abandoned by a black father confronts his past in when faced with Allmuseri tribe that make him come to realize African, non-western, anti-dualistic origins. He says: "... when I look behind me for my father, there is only emptiness ... (160).

Race, culture and the text for the African-American writer is the crucial moment of the identity search. And the key to this question in *Middle Passage* is the history of Rutherford's encounter with the Allmuseri that are exotic, romanticized avatars of a perfect timeless age. *Middle Passage* highlights racial identity as a hybrid active process of being that interprets itself and the culture around it. Johnson asserts this identity as a means to a larger humanistic target, which is the freedom of perception not just for African Americans but for all people. Rutherford, thief and liar caught in the loop of appropriation and definition, becomes himself. He proves to be far more certain of how his life and the lives of all other persons overlap, join, and depend on each other. Being the survivor of many difficulties, Calhoun points out a greater survival deleting his personal interests: "... searching myself, I discovered I no longer cared if I lived or died" (127). Thus, *Middle Passage* announces Calhoun as a member of a larger universal entity who addresses ultimate truths. As Johnson questions: "Universals are not static", but changing and evolving.

Middle Passage, in the resolution of identity question, a central theme of the novel, leaves its

answer unresolved. The novel rests on a question mark and a struggle. The novel interrogates the mechanics of identity and meaning and inscribes the crossroads in response to, against, and across the parameters of identity, cultural variety, and multiplicity of traditions, gender, race, and social rank.

CONCLUSION

Considering the culture, body and plot story in the novel as indifferent from each other, they are actually cited in connection with each other in a manner that feeds a web of interactions of identity, belief and value. Taking the value of identity and its modes of expression, *Middle Passage* juxtaposes the above mentioned values and Calhoun's "middle" posture as suspended between being a black in America and staying in conflicts with native cultures, past and present. Such a drastic condition can be seen as generic for all universal entities, not only for one man or race. The middle space and energy, as stated by Scott in his article, "is ever evolving, never there" (654). In the phase of transformation or evolution of identity, there is always an interval of acceptance and refusal of the "middle" space of problematic identities and relevant issues to it. By pressing on the cultural dialogue between Europe, Africa and America, *Middle Passage* offers an ambivalence, contradiction and indeterminacy which is believed a part of Americanism.

In the crossing of the cultural boundaries *Middle Passage* stays in favour of dynamic structures of the self of cultural and textual dichotomies. Just when the crossing takes place, it deletes differences and collapses reality by creating a leap of conciseness that attempts to rediscover the point of rupture, the division between the implicitly said and explicitly unsaid. The outcome of the crossing the cultural boundaries is a meaning and value that cherish all consciousness. Thus, identity founded on this is the product of opposition but of contradiction and liberated perception.

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