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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: Reflection of 'Lynching' and 'Passing' as Strategies**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the strategic use of 'lynching' and 'passing' in African American society through the examination of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. It argues that 'lynching' is a strategy applied by Whites to keep Blacks under control and similarly, 'passing' is a strategy used by light skinned Blacks to attain social and economic benefits, which are generally available to white people. To show the fact that people of color in the US are trapped between two cultures, identities, and lives, this paper highlights the unnamed narrator's decision to pass for White by relinquishing his black identity for the conveniences and supremacy that the white identity entails. Applying the approach of textual analysis, the present paper aims at investigating how the issues of 'lynching' and 'passing' are portrayed in literary writing. It demonstrates that, due to unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances and the threat of being lynched, the unnamed protagonist of the novel passes for white as early as his childhood years. Although the unnamed narrator desires to liberate himself from the decisiveness of pre-established categories like race, the experience of passing is heterogeneous and differently constructed and operated in the narrative. The narrator takes the least troubled path and declares his passing for white at the end of the novel.

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**KEYWORDS** Afro-Americans, Lynching, Mulatto, Passing, Race Identity

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**Introduction**

Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* follows an unnamed narrator (ex-colored man) of mixed ancestry through a racist US society. The unnamed narrator is light-skinned enough to pass for white. Keeping his real identity secret, the narrator takes advantage of his fair skin. As he admits, "I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions" (Johnson, 2004, p. 3). He spends his childhood in a small town in Georgia, where he is raised by a single mother and an absent father. After some time the mother and her son move to Connecticut. The narrator's mother enrolls him in a private school, where he soon proves himself a good student. The white color of his skin and innate talent help him to study at school without issue. Later he moves to other places and gains more knowledge about American society and white people's attitude to the blacks. The scene of Whites lynching Blacks provides him a lens to explore how black bodies were terrorized and commodified during late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America. To utilize his in-between position the unnamed narrator adopts the strategies of masking and performing. He uses this strategic tool to overcome the obstacles and gain social acceptance in American South. Concerning the unnamed narrator's situation, Goellnicht (1996) in his work "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" states, "*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*- the narrative of a fair skinned mulatto man who, after many difficulties on both sides of the color line, and much agonizing over the

"Negro problem" in America, chooses to pass for white" (p. 17). Goellnicht reveals the fact that the unnamed narrator takes this unexpected decision to escape from the difficulties of the color line. Exposing the incidents of racial discrimination and violence in the central part of the novel, he announces his passing for white as an endeavor to find personal freedom and peace in the American North.

### Literature Review

*The Autobiography* is the fictional account of a fair skinned unnamed black man. The story is narrated by the first-person narrator. He relates of being born in the South and growing up in Connecticut where he realizes that he is a biracial boy whom others assume as white. Pfeiffer (1996), in his work "Individualism, Success, and American Identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" states, ". . . he (the ex-colored man) is both legally black and visibly white" (403). Later, he moves to the South to join a better college for higher education. The narrator travels to different places in America. After witnessing lynching, he escapes to European countries, recounting his experiences in black and white society along the way. Pfeiffer (1996), further expresses, "Passing in general and the ex-colored man's narrative in particular, have long been viewed as instances of racial self-hatred and disloyalty" (p. 403). Finally, he decides to return to America and study traditional black music.

The plot of the novel reflects the protagonist's failures to intervene or even react properly to lynching. Instead of opposing such inhumanities, he passes for white. Grambs (1965), opines that the self-esteem of the blacks is damaged by the world they live in. The common belief is that white is right and black is bad. Blacks often feel inferior as a race, which makes difficult for them to recognize their potential as human beings in white dominated American society, therefore, the narrator chooses to pass. The protagonist passes on the cycle of failure to his children and their status. In the end of the novel, he declares that he'll grow a mustache and move back to New York, letting people identify him as whatever they want. As he says, "I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would" (Johnson, 2004, p. 108). The narrator becomes ambivalent about his identity. Finally, the protagonist's liminal status permits him a particular vantage point onto race relations, despite his failures, racism, and self-hatred.

### Material and Methods

The present study is qualitative in nature. The researcher proposes to use the approach of textual analysis. This paper aims to explore the cases of 'lynching' and 'passing' by analyzing Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. To conduct this research, the researcher has applied both primary and secondary sources. The data is collected from the references and materials, such as textbooks, online websites, articles, papers, author's biographies, journals, and other significant works, relevant to this study. This study highlights how whites use the strategy of 'lynching' to terrorize and control the blacks and how blacks use the strategy of 'passing' to gain social and economic benefits.

### Results and Discussion

*The Autobiography* begins with the unnamed narrator, who lives with his unwed mother in Georgia and later moves to Connecticut. The narrator is unnamed because he is the bastard son of a wealthy white man and a mixed race woman. Reflecting on the unnamed narrator's identity, Fleming (1970), in "Contemporary Themes in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*", explains, "The main character is nameless in a

figurative sense because he is the bastard son of a wealthy white Southerner and a mulatto servant" (p. 120). Unfolding the secret related to the narrator, Fleming argues that the protagonist is nameless because he does not have any identity.

The narrative exposes the predicaments of an unwed black mother, who is not accepted by her white lover as his wife. Due to unfair socio-cultural circumstances for black women/ mothers, she becomes the victim of unjust society. The narrator's mother performs her responsibilities sincerely. With the passage of time he knows about the intimate bond between his mother and father. His mother loves and defends his father in their conversations, though he does not prefer to live a good family life with her. Regarding white men's attitude towards black women, Washington (1970), in *Marriage in Black and White*, writes, "White men have failed to be serious in their relationships with the black women in comparison to the seriousness of relationship between the black men and white women" (p. 61). Relating the seriousness of the relationship between white men and black women, Washington unfolds the fact that white men take black women lightly even if they are deeply engaged with them. This insincerity of the relation can be seen clearly in the narrative. When the narrator's father visits her, she feels very happy and wishes that he would stay there longer. As the narrator reveals, "My mother was all in smile; I believe that was one of the happiest moments of her life" (Johnson, 2004, p. 21). But her white lover moves earlier. She passes away shortly after the narrator's high school graduation. The unfair race relation makes her suffer; even then she struggles a lot for a prosperous future of her son.

Discriminatory treatment to colored children at school makes the narrator realize that he belongs to black race. One day the principal comes in the class and orders all the white students to stand. When the narrator stands up, the principal asks him to retake his seat. The narrator gets upset and later he understands the reason behind the principal's discriminatory response. When the school is over, he returns home and inquires his mother about the matter. As narrated, "I buried my head in her lap and blurted out: 'Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?'" (Johnson, 2004, p. 12). Unwillingly, she informs him that she is a colored woman, therefore, he is not considered white, even though he is fair skinned. Reflecting American people's perception of racial identity, Collins (2000) in *Black Feminist Thought*, reveals, "U.S. notion of racial purity, such as the rule claiming that one drop of black blood determines racial identity" (p. 133). Collins clarifies that people who contain even one drop of black blood are considered to be black in America. The narrator's mother is a mixed race woman; therefore, he belongs to black race. The event makes him feel that he is a mixed race child. In this way, he realizes how race affects every facet of American life.

After graduating from school the narrator chooses to attend the Atlanta University for higher education. Atlanta proves to be uninspiring for him. He decides not to stay there when his money is stolen. He moves to Jacksonville, Florida, and finds a job at a cigar factory, where he has to read newspapers for the Spanish-speaking workers. Observing their activities and behaviors, the narrator puts black people into three different categories. The first one is the desperate class blacks. This category includes ex-convicts, drunks, and loafers, who hate the whites and their dominance in the society. Domestic servants, who are generally very simple, liberal, kind-hearted, and faithful, fall in the second category. They love and respect their white masters who, in turn, become fond of them. The well-to-do and educated colored people fall in third category. They are concerned with the race question so white people take them suspiciously. Observing the three categories of colored people he describes:

I shall give the observations I made in Jacksonville as seen through the light of after years; and they apply generally to every Southern community. The colored people may be said to be roughly divided into three classes . . . There are those constituting what might be called the desperate class - the men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps, the ex-convicts, the bar-room loafers are all in this class . . . The second class, as regards the relation between blacks and whites, comprises the servants, the washerwomen, the waiters, the cooks, the coachmen, and all who are connected with whites by domestic service . . . The third class is composed of the independent workmen and tradesmen, and of the well-to-do and educated colored people; and, strange to say, for a directly opposite reason they are as far removed from the whites as the members of the first class I mentioned. (Johnson, 2004, pp. 44-45)

The narrator believes that the class factor plays a vital role in race relations. As long as colored people stay submissive to white dominance, no racial conflicts take place. In his opinion the working class African Americans are generally "simple, kind-hearted, and faithful" (Johnson, 2004, p. 45), because they tolerate white violence and oppression. Desperate class blacks are illiterate and poor. They have no access and opportunities in state affairs. They are entirely depressed due to their poor economic status and unmanaged living conditions. To make them work properly and control them from revolting, white community terrorizes them with threats and violence. The well-to-do and "the Talented Tenth", that is according to Du Bois, the group of intellectuals, promoters of social transformation, and future leaders, are also oppressed and threatened in American South. The white community spreads terror by applying strategic tools like 'lynching' to keep them under control.

The ex-colored man notices the crudest reality of racism in lynching scene. One night, he notices that a group of white men burn a black man alive. The narrator feels disturbed when he sees the horrific event. Reflecting the humiliation and shame he feels, the narrator expresses:

A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive. (Johnson, 2004, p. 106)

The lynching scene reveals the climax of racism. Before this moment, the narrator used to spend most of his time with educated and liberal whites. This event solidifies his fateful decision to pass as white, and rescue himself from potential torture because he knows that whites do not hold a rational viewpoint on race relations.

In describing the black victim's pathetic situation in graphic detail, the narrator demonstrates the dehumanization and victimization of the black body. He shows the strategies that the whites use to objectify the black subjects. The black lynched victim, who is depicted as, "a man only in form and stature" giving out "cries and groans" and the white lynch mob, which is portrayed as a "crowd yelling and cheering" (Johnson, 2004, p. 106), represent the crude reality of racist social order. Regarding lynching, West (1993), in *Race Matters*, asserts, "White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them. One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them" (p. 86). West reveals that the whites use 'lynching' as a strategy to instill fear in black folks in order to terrorize and keep them under control. The brutal scene creates tension for the protagonist and leaves him helpless. The memory of the victim's haunting cries and groans profoundly bewilder and disturb him. The narrative suggests that the black male body is in crisis. And at the same time it challenges central myths and established assumptions regarding lynching, which is the myth of the

black man as a rapist, of white superiority, of race as a biological and/or stable concept, and of racial purity.

The brutal scene of lynching fills the protagonist with humiliation and shame. He decides not to submit himself to that savagery. Finally, he plans to abandon his race to save himself from the horrific treatment to which colored people were dominated. Unfolding his decision to hide his identity, the narrator describes:

I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. (Johnson, 2004, p. 108)

The protagonist was once eager to be part of the black community, but gradually he realizes what it means to be an African American. He, finally, chooses to pass as white in order to grab opportunities and have a dignified life. Regarding the narrator's decision to hide his black identity, Andrade (2006) argues that due to the problem of race relation, Johnson's mixed race protagonist hides his black identity and passes as white. In "Revising Critical Judgments of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" published in *African American Review*, she explicates, "Johnson represents a fictional anti-hero, a black man who chooses to 'pass' for a white man who need not negotiate the hardships of race relations in America" (Andrade, 2006, p. 257). Andrade declares Johnson's protagonist as an anti-hero, who escapes from the hardships of race relations in America. Instead of fighting back, he passes for a white man. This all reflects the strategy that fair skinned blacks use to protect themselves from the effects of insensitive race relation between the blacks and the whites. The protagonist chooses an easy path due to racial discrimination and violence.

The narrator's experiences at school and other places make him learn the hardships of living as a black. Concerning the narrator's experiences of living as a black, Berzon (1978), in *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*, explains:

He is not being honest with himself . . . the hard lesson that he had learned in school and during the intervening years, when he had lived as a black man, was surely that he would be categorized as either black or white. And since he does not look like a Negro, according to the conception of most whites, he must know that he will be treated as a white man. (Berzon, 1978, p. 156)

Berzon observes that the bitter experiences the narrator faces at school and work places make him conceal his real identity. His ability to pass has been repeatedly hinted in the narrative. Social pressure imposes its patterns onto his behavior. Finally, he decides to move to the North. Justifying his decision to move, he narrates, "I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals" (Johnson, 2004, p. 108). In this way, the unfavorable socio-cultural circumstances make the protagonist disassociate himself from the category of victimized African Americans.

The narrator desires to get freedom from categories and challenge and defy conceptualizations of race so he eventually chooses a mid-way. Concerning the narrator's choice, Hostert (2007) describes that passing, which the narrator chooses, is refusal and renewal both. In *Passing: A Strategy to Dissolve Identities and Remap Differences*, he asserts, "Passing is a refusal to be confined within historically limiting structures of existence. But just as passing is a refusal of the given, it is also an opportunity for renewal and

growing" (Hostert, 2007, p. 15). Hostert believes that the passing of the protagonist should not only be viewed through the point of view of selfishness and betrayal to the black race. Passing can also be viewed as a possibility of freedom from categories that compel an individual to live in a permanent condition for the rest of his life. The ex-colored man desires to grab better opportunities, therefore, he uses the strategic tool of 'passing'.

The narrator finally feels that the disclosure of his social identity creates problems for him. He stands completely at odds. In spite of his efforts, he cannot hide his blackness but enters into the in-betweenness of mulattoes. He says, "So once again I found myself gazing at the towers of New York and wondering what future that city held in store for me" (Johnson, 2004, p. 108). This reality is signaled in the novel by other clues such as the ex-colored man's feeling of separation and loneliness. The idea of self-estrangement creates for him another kind of conflict which usually leads the ex-colored man to self-hatred. Fleming (1970), in "Contemporary Themes in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*", published in *Negro American Literature Forum*, asserts, "Black self-hatred is another important theme employed by Johnson. Constantly told that he is a member of an inferior race, the black man may come to believe or fear that he really is inferior" (p. 122). Fleming explains that due to the belief of being inferior, the ex-colored man feels a strong dislike towards the idea of being categorized with the other colored people and of losing the rights that his white skin bestows upon him. Fleming's words are relevant because this is the case of many fair skinned blacks who try to combat against the socially imposed definition of their identities as colored, holding onto their whiteness, and thus refusing to acknowledge their in-between selves. Cooke (1984) uses the word escapist for the ex-colored man because of his disloyal attitude to his race. In *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century*, he remarks, "The Ex-Colored Man becomes essentially an escapist" (Cooke, 1984, p. 48). The narrator's passing for white, however, is condemned as an expression of racial disloyalty.

## Conclusion

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912, is best characterized as a fictional autobiography. It adopts a documentary narrative style. Johnson demonstrates 'lynching' and 'passing' as strategic tools used by whites and blacks respectively to make situation favorable for them. 'Lynching', which is an informal public execution by a mob in order to punish an alleged, represents the crudest reality of racism. White people use this strategic tool to terrorize and control the black community. The narrative shows that the lynching scene creates a very bad effect on the narrator's psyche. Before this moment, the narrator used to spend most of his time with educated and liberal whites. This event compels him to pass for white to escape from violence because he knows well that whites do not hold a rational viewpoint on race relations. To save himself from potential torture at the hands of whites, the ex-colored man takes this unexpected decision. Similarly, 'passing', which is an attempt of assimilation into white culture, is a strategy used by mix-race blacks to attain social and economic benefits and to overcome the obstacles. The narrator's secret passing for white at a first glance confirms the tragic existence of the people of color in American South. He uses this strategic tool to gain social and economic advantages and to overcome the difficulties created by racism. The narrator's constant struggle against racism and effort to blur the color line indicate his ambivalence towards blackness and whiteness alike. The novel's ending suggests a sense of reconciliation. As the ex-colored man argues with satisfaction, "My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise" (Johnson, 2004, p. 120). The narrator remains specifically unclear about his own position. The lines indicate a potential resolution of his uncertainty in the

acceptance of his mixed-race identity as the father of two (mixed-race) children. Reflecting mulatto protagonist's decision to pass for white, the novel reveals the crisis that black body encounters. Presenting an unnamed ex-colored man as its narrator, Johnson points out the outcomes of racial discrimination and violence on black people's lives.

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