

RACISM AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY IN *ON BEAUTY*

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Abstract:

Racism has been rampant in American society even in the post-colonial eras. Critical Race Theory emphasizes that racism in European countries never died but only hid better. The racial attitudes of the white races not only impact the minority races as an individual but also prove to be hazardous for the families that are either multi-racial or belong to minor races leading to dysfunctional families. Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* is about two families the Belsey family and the Kipps family, the novel shows that racism impacts the relationship of two families with each other and also affects the individual relationships within one family. The novel highlights that American society may claim to have resolved racial issues but the real-life scenarios show that racism still exists and it impacts the social and personal relationships and attitudes of individuals. Furthermore, it reveals that the social set-up is created in a way that hampers the growth of colored races thus proving the claims of critical race theory.

Keywords: racism, dysfunctional family, post-colonialism, racial attitudes, critical race theory

The novel revolves around two families – the Belsey family and the Kipps family. The Belsey family consists of Howard Belsey a white Englishman who works as a professor, his wife Kiki who is African-American, and their mixed-race kids Jerome, Zora, and Levi. The Belseys are

atheists and do not care much for the cultural and historical background of the family. They are bold and often blasphemous, at one point in the novel the narrator says, “It was an ailment Zora inherited from her father: when confronted with people she knew to be religious she began to blaspheme wildly.” (Smith 145) However, not all of them turn out to be similar, as the novel progresses the reader finds stark differences among the individuals of the Belsey family which challenges the family unity.

The second major family in the novel is the Kipps family which is a British-Caribbean family, Monty Kipps is the patriarch of the family and the professional rival of Howard, Carelene is his wife, and they live with their two kids Micheal Kipps and Victoria Kipps. This family is considerably religious and even conservative. In a comparative analysis of the families, Imke Beens notes, “Monty's family values are based around the Christian faith and are very conservative, while Howard's family is raised to be liberal and analytic.” (Beens 19)

The lives of the families are intertwined, the patriarchs Howard and Monty work together at Wellington University where they often find themselves in conflict with each other, the narrator says “Howard had always disliked Monty, as any sensible liberal would dislike a man who had dedicated his life to the perverse politics of right-wing iconoclasm” (Smith 40) The girls Zora and Victoria go to the same university where Howard and Monty work. The wives Kiki and Carlene also become good friends as the novel progresses. Jerome and Victoria have an affair for a short time and Howard is also attracted to Victoria which turns into a sexual interaction later in the novel. The families are thus related to each other and often interact in a good or a bad way.

Howard Belsey is the only major character who is from a white background, all the other characters are either multi-racial or from a black background. The pride that comes with *whiteness* is evident in Howard’s character. He is a pretty judgmental character with very specific tastes, the

novel shows that racism impacts families and also redefines the notion of beauty. The impact is specifically obvious in the Belsey family because the patriarch is white which makes him think low of his colored wife, Fahma notes:

Interracial marriages among blacks and whites differ from other interracial marriages. Even though African-Americans have been a part of the United States for several generations, they still feel alienated compared to another race. While interracial marriages between black women and white men seem fine, in reality, white men place black women unequal in their marriages. White men put themselves in a higher position than black women. So that, black women feel alienated in their marital relationships (Kaba 2012). (Fahma 184)

The tension is obvious in Howard and Kiki's marital relationship as well. Howard's racial attitude makes it hard for him to respect his wife and even his colleague, Monty. When Kiki comes to know about his affair she yells, "Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this . . . this *sea* of white. I barely *know* any black folk any more, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your *fucking* college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor. I *staked my whole life* on you. And I have no idea any more why I did that." (Smith 265) Howard himself admits that she has changed in a way he cannot explain but it is clear that her skin color is one of the major reasons for his disliking.

The Belsey family cannot accept the black heritage because of the different races of the patriarch and matriarch of the family, this lack of acceptance impacts the kids in different ways. Jerome finds solace in religion although the family is atheist, Zora believes that academia will be helpful in resolving the issues while Levi who is impacted by racial notions the most feels the need to find identity in black heritage and joins a Haitian group. Everybody in the family is yearning

for a concrete identity which is a crisis faced by most of Smith's characters, however, in an interview related to *On Beauty* Smith presents a different perspective of finding out an identity in a diasporic land, she says:

The Belsey children need to stop worrying about their identity and concern themselves with the people they care about, ideas that matter to them, beliefs they can stand by, tickets they can run on. Intelligent humans make those choices with their brain and hearts and they make them alone. The world does not deliver meaning to you. You have to make it meaningful. The Belseys need to weigh situations as they appear before them, and decide what they want and need and must do. It's a tough, unimaginably lonely and complicated way to be in the world. But that's the deal: you have to live; you can't live by slogans, dead ideas, clichés, or national flags. Finding an identity is easy. It's the easy way out. (Smith)

The family, however, cannot stop the quest for identity because the racial differences make it unable for them to connect with each other like a family unit.

Monty and Carlene do not suffer due to racism in the way the Belsey family suffers but they surely have to deal with the racial attitude of the Belsey family, also Howard's notion of Monty's conservativeness shows the racial prejudice in American society. The friendship between Kiki and Carlene is another proof of looking out for racial identity in a diasporic life. The painting that Carlene shows to Kiki and then leaves for her after her death alludes that the black women in both families have been suffering from nostalgia and the painting seems to be a link back to the racial identity, it is the portrait of a black virgin by a Haitian painter, Carelene says of it, "She's a great Voodoo goddess, Erzulie. She's called the Black Virgin – also, the Violent Venus." (Smith 224) The families thus have the undertones of racism affecting their lifestyle. In the case of the

Belsey family, the impacts of racism are more obvious but even in the Kipps family, the effects can be seen. Every colored person except Howard feels alienated in a sea of white people.

The racial attitudes in the Belsey family lead to a dysfunctional family, the individuals are affected by the lack of interaction and connection within the family. Everything they do is judged from a prejudiced perspective. Howard's racial attitude makes it hard for him to appreciate the beauty of his wife and he rather goes for the white woman Claire Malcolm, his appreciation for white skin makes it impossible for him to appreciate Kiki, he says, "It's true that men – they respond to beauty...it doesn't end for them, this...this *concern* with beauty as a physical actuality in the world – and that's clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes...but it's *true* and...I don't know how else to explain what –" (Smith 267) The scene that follows shows that the family has indeed fallen apart. Kiki accuses Howard of flirting and having sexual relationships with other women. The choice of diction in this section specifically highlights the intensity of dysfunctionality within the family and all of this chaos is because the interracial marriage between Kiki and Howard does not work anymore.

Racial tensions also force Levi to join a group of Haitian boys, he feels deeply inspired looking at Felix who is the leader of these boys, the narrator says that while looking at Felix:

"he had this idea that Felix was like the *essence* of blackness in some way. You looked at Felix and thought: *This* is what it's all about, being *this* different; this is what white people fear and adore and want and dread. He was as purely black as – on the other side of things – those weird Swedish guys with translucent eyelashes are purely white. It was like, if you looked up black in a dictionary...It was awesome." (Smith 310)

In his attempt to connect with his race, he fails to analyze his actions. When the boys tell him that the painting Monty has kept in the office belongs to a Haitian painter and it is their duty

to get it, he steals the painting. When Kiki confronts him about his disgraceful action he says, “People in Haiti, they got NOTHING, RIGHT? We living off these people, man! We – we – living off them! We sucking their blood – we’re like vampires! *You* OK, married to your white man in the land of plenty – *you* OK. *You* doing fine. You’re living off these people, man!” (Smith 543) The lack of contentment in the family shows that there is no unity among the family members the narrator, therefore, says, “The Belseys – petty, cheap and cruel – are not a family anyone would fight to retain.” (Smith 27)

The family of Kipps also appears to be dysfunctional, Carelene’s dying wish is not valued by her husband and kids. She leaves her expensive painting for Kiki but as the narrator mentions, “the Kippses, unlike the Belseys, had no horror of talking frankly about money.” (Smith 352) Michael, therefore, insists that Carlene could not have left one of the valuable family assets to a stranger, he says, “Now you’re telling me she left the most valuable painting in the house to practically a stranger? To Kiki Belsey? I don’t think so.” (Smith 352) The painting is then kept by Monty in his office, this argument over Carlene’s death wish shows that none of them knew her as well as they might have believed. They think that Carlene’s wish is merely a symptom of her illness and should be forgotten. Furthermore, the attempt to keep the painting shows that Monty and his family are also victims of racial prejudice and do not trust the Belsey family to have the painting of black heritage. In any case, racial prejudices deteriorate the family balance. Both families have communication gaps and a lack of respect which is a hallmark of a dysfunctional family.

The racial prejudice of the Kipps family towards the Belsey family proves the claims of Critical Race Theory. The theory highlights that people are always known and judged by their race and not character, specifically European countries judge individuals by their race and skin color

which is evident in the novel, Britannica defines it as an: “intellectual and social movement and loosely organized framework of legal analysis based on the premise that race is not a natural, biologically grounded feature of physically distinct subgroups of human beings but a socially constructed (culturally invented) category that is used to oppress and exploit people of colour.” (*Critical Race Theory*) Critical race theorists believe that American laws are framed to undermine the minor races, Jacey Fortin says in his article in *The New York Times*:

“Critical race theorists reject the philosophy of “colorblindness.” They acknowledge the stark racial disparities that have persisted in the United States despite decades of civil rights reforms, and they raise structural questions about how racist hierarchies are enforced, even among people with good intentions.” (Fortin)

The novel stands true to these claims, Carl’s character is the major evidence of critical race theory. He is a black man who performs slam poetry, although he is a school dropout he is really talented. Claire invites him to join her poetry class in Wellington but his arrival results in chaos at the university. Erskine Jegede who is the head of the African-American Studies Department calls Claire and says, “I can’t *create* a place for this kid at Wellington! I really enjoy having him in my class, but if Kipps gets the board to rule against discretionaries, what can I do? My hands are tied.” (Smith 467) Carl is an unenrolled student and Wellington University does not allow unenrolled students to sit in the class. However, if Carl were a white student the university might have reacted in a different way, his skin color becomes his definition and the university simply disapproves of Claire’s decision. CRT suggests that social and political laws are often made to hamper the growth of minority races which is evident in Carl’s case.

The major claim of CRT, however, is that racism has never ended which is obvious throughout the book, Thaslema in an analysis of the novel say, “Everyone in the neighbourhood

is staring at Levi as black youth...Levi, the youngest of the family, wants to mix up with the street lifestyle. He wishes he was not born in the white neighbourhood of Wellington but in Boston's back street in Roxbury." (Thasleema 3065) When Carl comes, Levi becomes one of his close friends which shows that he feels alienated in the American racist society. Furthermore, Howard's attempt to have an affair with Claire Malcolm who is a white woman reveals the existence of racism. Levi's effort to steal the painting hints at his attempt to get an identity which he thinks will allow him to get a status in society. Above all, critical race theory believes that racism never ended after colonialism but only hid better in the post-colonial era and the novel shows it to be true.

As Critical Race Theory suggests racism impacts the behavior of individuals and society. American society makes it hard for individuals of racial or multiracial backgrounds to find their identity in the country, they roam around to find out things that could give meaning and depth to their existence. It is not only the individuals but the behavior of the dominant class that affects them, Kiki describes herself as, "a black woman in a headwrap, approaching with a bottle in one hand and a plate of food in the other, like a maid in an old movie." (Smith 128) Individual attitudes are thus affected by the racial attitudes of others. Although Kiki is an American-African, she knows that she is merely an African to the white people. Howard's affair with Claire is another example of how racism can impact personal attitudes. Levi's wish to leave his neighborhood and move someplace else hints at the same aspect. Personal behaviors are thus affected by racism in American society.

Furthermore, social attitudes are also overshadowed by racism. Levi tells his family that whenever he goes out, everybody stares at him which shows that society perceives him as a black person who can only bring trouble, he tells Howard:

This old lady on Redwood – I was minding my business – and she’s looking at me, looking at me, all the way down the street, like everybody in this town – she stops me, speaking to me – she looked like she was trying to work out if I was gonna kill her... And then she started talking about my mom this, my mom that. Black lady. (Smith 112)

Carl also suffers because of the prejudiced attitude of society. Even Victoria Kipps has to deal with prejudice, she is a victim of not only racism but patriarchy as well. The patriarchal standards judge every woman as a commodity – a source of male comfort, “Victoria grapples with the fact that people can only see her as beautiful, and do not, or cannot look beyond that.” (Beens 7) Even Zora says that “She’s just a typical pretty-girl, power-game playing, deeply shallow human being.” (Smith 308) She thinks Victoria just uses her charm to get things done, Jerome and Howard fall for her without any serious intentions which signifies that she is treated as an object.

The characters thus face individual or social prejudice throughout the novel which alters their attitude, they either feel rebellious like Levi or lose confidence like Kiki, Imke Beens says, “there is a palpable difference between the way in which characters perceive themselves, and the way in which they are perceived by others. I believe this difference mostly stems from prejudices about gender and racial stereotypes. [...] This perception is clearly based on stereotypes in Western society.” (Beens 5-6) The prejudice affirms that CRT is not entirely wrong in its claims and that the growth of an individual in American society still depends on his or her skin color. Talent, determination, or resolution are not enough to achieve success – all the qualities that guarantee a secure future need to be coupled with light skin color.

On Beauty thus shows that the post-colonial world still has racism, American society may claim to be liberal and free but it cannot grant equality when it comes to people of different races. The struggle for identity is undoubtedly a very complicated journey and it is not only impacted by

one's race but the novel shows multiple other things that are influenced by racial prejudices. The characters suffer because they cannot perceive each other on equal terms, they either feel inferior or superior to others. Racial prejudice trickles down and affects families individually. Also, racism makes it impossible for people of minority races to run in the race for success. Colored people are not granted equal rights but they are judged as if they have received the upbringing of a white child. Zadie Smith successfully portrays the tensions faced by people of colored races in a land that refuses to own them.

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