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Beauty, Class, and Color (BCC): Intertwined Issues in Olive Senior's Short Story, The Two Grand-mothers

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Abstract
The present article analyses how the themes of beauty, class, and color (BCC) are intertwined in the short story, The Two grandmothers, by the Jamaican woman writer, Olive Senior. First, it sets the socio-historical context of the short story. Then, it examines the significance and impact of the issues of beauty, class, and color in the lives of women through a girl-child narrator. The aim of the study is to expose the historical inter-relatedness of the three themes and their psychological impact on the female characters.Relying on two theoretical approaches,namely postcolonialism and psychoanalysis, the study demonstrates theintertwinement of the triple theme. The findings show thatevoking one issue implies dealing with the other two, because of their historical interconnection.

Key words*: Beauty, Class, Color, Postcolonialism, Psychological trauma, Intertwinement*

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I. Introduction

Beauty, class, and color (BCC) are recurrent themes in the writings of many Caribbean female writers because of their impacts in the lives of women. The present article analyses how beauty, class, and color are intertwined in the short story, The Two grandmothers, by the Jamaican woman writer, Olive Senior. The aim of the study is to reveal that although these three issues are different, it is very difficult to handle them separately. First, the analysis examines the historical reasons behind the relation between the three issues of BCC. Then, it deals with their impact on the girl-narrator of the story, as the whole tale is told from her perspective and the questions she asks her biological mother.

II. Theoretical Framework

The studyisconductedfromtwotheoreticalapproaches, namelypostcolonialism and psychoanalysis. The first theory, postcolonialism, is appropriate for conducting the study because of the strong impact of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean experience. In fact, Katie Mantooh defines postcolonialism as theaftermathof theWestern colonisation on some parts of the world(Mantooh, Katie et al. np.). The Caribbean spaceisamongthosespacesthathadundergone the aftermath of bothslavery and colonialism. Thesetwopainfulexperiencesintroduced new concepts of class, race and beauty according to the standards of the Western colonizers.According to McDonald and Branche, postcolonial theory "argues that postcolonial societies have not overcome the original colonizingsins of domination, racism, and exploitation, and so the majority of their populations are excludedfrom the full benefits of development - even in 21st century Caribbean societies" (McDonald and Branche 161).

In the same vein, in his article, "post-colonial children", Vazquez stresses "the political conception of literature, as a weapon to fight against social inequalities, the re-writing of history from previously silenced perspectives…" (264). The Two Grandmothers can be read as a rewriting of socio-cultural history by the writer. Through the short story, Senior exposes how racism and exploitation have an impact on the characters of her story and how many of them suffer from social inequalities.

As for psychanalysis, itisappropriatefor the studybecause the analysisfocuses on the psychological impact of slavery and colonialism on the Caribbean people. It is the original division of the mind by the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmond Freud, whichis the theoreticalinterest for thestudy. In fact, according to Freud's model, the mind has three components which are in constant conflict: the Id whichoperates at the unconsciouslevel, the ego whichworks as a filter for the id, and the superegowhichis the conscience or locus of morality and the sociallyecceptablebehaviour. (Nash, np.). It is the constant conflicting nature of the components and theirpsychological impact which are interesting for theanalysis. In fact, in the twograndmothers, the child-narratorfindsherself in situtations in whichhermindisconstantly in turmoilbecause of hercontinuousshiftingfrom one environment to another, herdesires, herdenialof feelings, and repression of various life experiences.

III. Context

As statedabove, The TwoGrandmothersis a short story by the Jamaicanwomanwriter, Olive Senior. Jamaicanhistory and the life experiences of womenare very important for anyseriousanalysis of Senior'sworks. For thisanalysis, history and the socio-cultural environment are key factors to the understanding of the text.Moreover, the historicalcontext the story comesfrom,ishighlysignificant for anyanalysis of the issues understudy, namely BCC. The country knowntoday as Jamaica, underwenttwo major Europeanslaveryexperiences, the Spanish and the British,respectivelyin the 16th and 17th centuries. Jamaicaalsoexperienced the migration of Indians and Chinese as indenturedworkers in the19th century. (History of Jamaica, Embassy of Jamaica, https//www.jis.gov.jm).

The consequence of this mixed history has given the Caribbean in general, and Jamaica in particular, a complexhybrid population composed of the remainingArawakan population thatwere in the land at the arrival of Columbus in 1494, the Europeans, and people of African, Indian, and Chinesedescents. The Caribbean cultural diversityreflects a kind of melting pot or complexhybridity of the land. "According to Cubanwriter, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, "the Caribbean has an identitythatischaractirized by . . . plurality, fluidity, and syncretism" (Quoted in Smith et. al, 1).

The hybridityis part of the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, twoopressivesystemsbased on forced migration and economic exploitation of the weaker classes by Europeanpowers. Withthesesystems, new alienating values such as economicstatus, language, color of skin, texture of hair, shape and size of some parts of the body, are introduced in the cultures. All these values came withalienating, traumatising and psychologicalconsequences on the people, as the studydemonstrates, through the girl- narrator.

Discussing notions of caribeanness, the critic Helen Gilbert used the phrase "syncretic identity" (25). She argues that Senior's achievement is her particular interest in the vicissitudes of childhood in terms of identity politics (24). She further claims that Senior's evocative portraits of marginalized and displaced children exemplify the alienated subjects of "creolization" to reflect the cultural tensions and values which remain unresolved in theories of creolization and hybridity." (25) This hybrid nature creates a complex view of beauty in the Caribbean context and a strong effect of such cultural value on the women.

IV. The Intertwinement of Beauty, Class, and Color

Across many cultures in the world, beauty represents an asset for the woman. But what is beauty? It is a cultural concept that may vary according to the context under consideration. For example, while being skinny is desirable in Western cultures, in many African cultures, plump women are seen as beautiful. Discussing the cultural dimension of beauty, Judy Scheel argues that "Not only does our culture determine who is desirable, but it also attempts to manipulate our primitive and intuitive sense about who we deem attractive." She further opines that we are under "constant assault and control by our culture" (Scheel, n. p).Our culture is first and foremost, our immediate environment. For the child narrator in Senior's short story, her immediate environment is the three homes through which she navigates, precisely the different homes of the two grandmothers and that of her parents.

These are the three places that teach her about what is deemed beautiful and desirable for a small black girl. According to the critic Berrian, for many Caribbean women writers, mothers are vehicles of culture and historyin the formation of a female identity (Berrian, 200). This is why the narrator calls for the help of the mother in trying to understand her own identity. A deciphering of the following quotations from the short story, informson how culture indoctrinates and creates feelings of alienation and confusion about one's identity.

Mummy, am I really a nigger?
But mummy, how can I be beautiful? My skin is so dark;
And my hair is so coarse, not like yours and Maureen's but then Maureen's father is white. (My underlining, Brown, 168)

Mummy, am I really a nigger? That's what Maureen said when we were playing one day and she got mad at me and she said, "you're only a goddamn nigger you don't know any better. Auntie Evie married a big black man and you' re his child and you're not fit to play with me. (Brown, 168)

In the first quotation, the narrator asks her mother if she is really a nigger. In asking for the confirmation or denial of her cousin calling her a nigger, the narrator expresses an identity trauma or confusion. She starts questioning her dark skin and coarse hair. She has difficulties understanding how Maureen, that she considers as fat and ugly, can call her a nigger, which implies being more beautiful than she is. The narrator' s logic is that if she is a nigger, she must be ugly. In the alienating, racist, and Western ideology, being a nigger equals being black and having coarse hair, both seen as criteria of ugliness. That is why the narrator is ashamed

of her identity and she asks her mother: "Mummy, why can't I have straight hair like Maureen? I'm so ashamed of my hair. I simply can't go back to Clearwater" (Brown, 169).

Clearwater is the appropriate name of the dwelling of her clear-skin cousins, Maureen and Jason. It is the opposite of the deepest dark waters, the home of the rural grandmother, according to the language of Grandma Elaine, the narrator's upper-class grandmother. Here the issue of being a "nigger" is intertwined with denial of beauty, belonging to the lower class, and being black. The narrator's cousin, Maureen is well aware of the stratification of her community on this basis. That is why she tells the narrator that she is not fit to play with her.

It is clear that the theme of colorism is at the center of the psychological anxiety of the girl-narrator. In postcolonial contexts, having a light skin is part of the criteria of beauty across the Caribbean and African space. It is due to the consequences of colonialism that the colonized woman learns to be ashamed of her color, a trauma that many modern day black women experience.In the past, in African communities, very dark women used to be proud of their skin color. For example,among the Zarma-Songhay community of Niger, very dark women used to be proud of being called *Weybi*(black woman). That naming is current in these communities andit reflects pride. But today with the phenomenon of *femme teintclair* in West African countries, being black is no longer a sign of pride and beauty. It has been replaced by light skin,whether it is natural or bought from the cosmetics industry.

The issue is pervasive among many black communities. *In Light Skinned-ded Naps*,Kristal BrentZook, the African-American writer, discussing what she calls the anger, the flaming rage around and between African American people,recalls that "the first Back Miss America had to be light in order to win" (Anzaldua, 88). In Toni Morrison's novel Sula, Helene, the light skinned character strongly believes in her light skin as an asset in the main stream white ideology. Although she and the protagonist who is the best friend of her daughter belong to the same black community, her behavior reflects that she comes from a better class. She believes in *a mulato lady respectability* before her trip ofdisillusionment, during which a white driver has shouted at her, as at a common *nigger*.

What happens in Sula, in the African American community is reflected in the The Two Grandmothers. In fact, a further deciphering of the second quotation reveals the social stratification of the child-narrator's community. The issue of beauty is intertwined with those of color and class as shown above in the quotations. In the same vein, in her article, *Claiming an Identity-Caribbean Women Writers in English*, Brenda F. Berrian states that "The obsessive preoccupation with skin color along with the extremes of poverty and wealth- all legacies of the plantation system" have a strong impact on Caribbean women. (204). In other words, skin color and economic capacity, are determiners of social classes that have been created by slavery and colonialism. In the quotation above, Berrian is referring to the aftermath or the historical remnants of the two oppressive systems namely, slavery and colonialism (204). Apart from the economic exploitation, these systems have brought in Caribbean culture new notions of feminine beauty, aligned with light skin, soft hair in connection with certain classes. These groups are in general related to the former white master. The narrator's cousin belongs to this class because her father is white, hence her light skin and silky hair.

The intertwinement of the racial and social stratification reflects the oppressive connection between issues of beauty, class and color. In fact, Ashcroft argues that "

like 'gender' and race, the concept of class intersectsin important ways with the cultural implications of colonial domination … Consequently, class was an important factor in colonialism, firstly in constructing the attitude of the colonizers towards different groups and categories of the colonized(natives), and increasingly amongst the colonized people themselves as they began to employcolonial cultural discourse to describe the changing nature of their own societies (Ashcroft et. Al. 33).

In The Two Grandmothers, Ashcroft's argument is valid in the analysis of the way the female characters judge each other, according to colonial criteria of beauty and determiners of class. One can decipher three classes, each one symbolized by some characters and their homes. Three aspects determine class, namely the dwelling (city or rural), the economic status, and the relation with the former master, the white colonizer. In the story, one can identify, the upper class to which belong the whites, the mulatos like Maureen, and black upper-class people like Elaine. The second class is composed of the fairly economic rural people like Granma Del. There is a third class which is the extremely poor rural lower-class people to which belong Pearlie and her family. What the narrator says about them reflects their socio-economic status. For example, about Pearlie's family, she tells her mother:

Pearlie is my best friend in the country she lives near to Grandma in this tiny house so many of them and all the children sleep together in one room on the floor and mummy, you know what? Pearlie has only one pair of shoes and one good dress and her school uniform though she hardly goes to school and some old things she wears around the house that have holes in them. Can you imagine? And you should see some of her little brothers. Half the time they are wearing no clothes at all (Brown, 164).

Although she is a child, her discourse shows that she is better of economically, compared to Pearlie. She lists to her mother all the work that Pearlie, who is about her age, does: taking care of her little brothers, fetching water, washing clothes, sweeping, cooking, etc. She says that Pearlie has never seen TV, has never been to the movies. Moreover, she does not have a father, as she has never known who her father is.

The three homes are symbols of the three degrees of social classes. The characters are well aware of class distinction. As stated above, the distinction is determined by rural or urban settings, the connection with the former white master, and on the economic capacity of the characters. Through their interaction with the narrator, characters criticize each other class wise. For example, Grandma Del does not want her grand-daughter, the narrator, to spend much time with her friend Pearlie, because she assumes that Pearlie does not have a good morality. She claims that "Pearlie is beginning to back-chat and is getting very force-ripe" and Eulalie and Ermandine"are disgraceful Jezebel-lot" who have brought shame on their father".

Here, the issue at stake is the link between the sexuality of the characters, their economic class and their morality. What Grandma Del is reproaching to the Pearlie's family women is their sexual freedom which allows them to have babies out of wedlock. But ironically, when her grand-child asks her about not having a wedding picture, she feels embarrassed. There is an allusion that Grandma Del herself must have had her son out of wedlock, as the interaction between Eulalie and the narrator conveys:

That Eulalie and I got into an argument. She's so ignorant I told her that it was a disgrace to have babies without being married and she said, 'who says?' and I said 'everybody. My mummy and Grandma Elaine and Grandma Del for a start.' And she said, 'Grandma Del? Yes? You ever hear that she that is without sin must cast the first stone?' And I said what do you mean? And she said 'Ask your Grannie Del Miss High-And Mighty since her son turn big-shot and all. Ask her who his father? … And why her daddy almost turn her out of the house and never speak to her for five years?

Discussing the Caribbean woman's quest for identity, Berrian opines that "The Caribbean woman's search for humanity and respect is intertwined with her cultural and sexual heritage" (203). She further rightly asserts that in this quest, there is a contrast between liberal Afro-Caribbean grassroots values and borrowed British colonial ones." (205). Liberal Afro-Caribbean grassroots values are more likely to allow women more sexual freedom than the Christian morality code. As for Helen Gilbert, she argues that in Senior's fiction, childhood is a powerful trope through which personal and social legacies of Jamaica's history are expressed (Gilbert, 24). This history embeds old values and the new ones that are the remnants of slavery and colonialism.

According to Vazquez, "Senior shows both the increasing of European and American standards and repressive character of the Christian religion." (Vazquez, 266). In the two grandmothers, Western standards of beauty,morality, and their psychological dimension on the women, is a major concern of the writer. For example, the child-narrator finds herself in a crossroad of confusion of values. She feels alienated because she a *classless* girl with the confused feeling of belonging and not belonging to any of the classes of her community. This creates an oppressive state in the mind of the girl.

Each class reflects the intertwinement of beauty, class, color and their implications. For example, the women of Pearlie's environment envy the narrator because, unlike them, she has long hair, which is a criterion of beauty. The narrator says: "Eulalie and Ermandine love to comb my hair and play with it they say I am lucky to have tall hair but Grandma Dell does not like Eulalie and Armandine anymore" (Brown, 165). Grandma Del herself admires her granddaughter because of the way she is physically: "Grandma loves to comb my hair she says it's so long and thick . . . Grandma Del says my skin is so beautiful like honey and all in all I am a fine brown lady." Here the older woman wants the girl to feel confident and proud of her identity as a fine brown and beautiful lady. But at the same time, her light-skinned cousin tells her she is nothing but a nigger. In her environment, this means not to have the right color nor the other beauty criteria such as light skin and silky hair.This is the identity confusion in which the girl narrator finds herself.

The narrator's rural grandmother also finds herself in the same confusion in her judgement of other women according to the repressive Christian values. Unfortunately, the older woman herself has not been able to respect the Christian value of the virtuous woman. There is the hint that the narrator's father was born out of wedlock.These inter-judgments of the characters of different classes convey various allusions to issues of beauty, class, and color and the identity crisis they undergo. The closer the women are to the western characteristics, the better they are viewed in terms of beauty. Thus, the appreciation of the child-narrator's hair and skin are seen as an asset for her.

Just like a normal child, the narrator is a keen observer of her environments: her grandma Del's house and the home of her parents. She compares the grandmother's house to that of her parents. The old woman belongs to a class that is different from the class of her parents. The child's comparison brings out the difference clearly. In the story, the notion of class in the post-colonial context, is different from the Eurocentric view whereby, parents and children belong generally to the same class. In the two grand-mothers, it is not the case. This is because in many postcolonial contexts, education has created a separation between people. This division has led to the creation of different classes. Within the same families, educated children who become adults

might feel that they do not belong to the class of their illiterate parents and relatives. The child-narrator observes that clearly. Even though she does not fully understand what is going on, she sees the difference in the way Grandma Del lives and the way her parents live. She states that nobody goes by her parents' house except gardeners and maids, while many people go by Grandma Del's house.She says to her mother,"Mummy, why can't we have lace curtains like grandma Del so we can peek though nobody ever goes by our house except the gardeners and the maids and people begging and Rastas selling brooms. But many people go by Grandma Del's house" (Brown, 160)

Grandma Del's son and his wife do not seem to belong to the class of their parents and their social realities reflect it. They do not live a community life like their mother. This can explain why towards the end of the story the child wants to detach herself from her rural paternal grand-mother. She prefers to be with her maternal grand-mother who seems to belong to the class of her parents and who can afford buying her presents. The paternal Grandma Del, on the other hand, belongs to the community in which girls might get children out of wedlock. The narrator realizes that her father must be one of these children. The questions she asks herself and her mother about not seeing any picture of her daddy's father, nor the wedding picture of grandma Del and her husband are evidences that grandma Del has had her son out of wedlock.

But ironically, Grandma Del believes she is better than the other community members that she looks down on. Del goes to church regularly and worries about the community people's heathenism. She even considers herself superior to the urban grand-mother. She does not want the narrator to spend too much time at Grandma Elaine's, where she worries about her grandchild's lack of acquisition of Christian values in the urban setting. As stated above, the irony lies in the fact that there is the assumption that the narrator's father must have been born out of wedlock, as we see in the following quotation from the short story:

Mummy, I really love grandma Del's house it's nice and cosy and dark and cool inside with these big lovely oval picture frames of her family and Daddy as a little boy… But you know what, Mummy, I didn't see a picture of Daddy's father and when I asked grandma, she got mad and shooed me away. She gets even madder when I asked her to show me her wedding picture. I only want to see it.

The author uses multiple irony to convey the socio-cultural confusion in which her characters find themselves. There is irony in the fact that the proud Christian Del has no wedding picture and she has a son whose father remains unknown.At the same time,she criticizes the other rural community women as loose.Another irony lies in Del's criticism of Elaine as a non-Christian woman, while the latter criticizes Del for being backward.

The narrator's two grandmothers are symbols that reflect the inter-relatedness of the themes of class and beauty. As stated earlier, in section one of the short story, the child-narrator talks about her stay at the house of the rural grand-mother. When talking about the rural grand-mother, she mentions her sociability and how everyone visits her. She also talks about the nice animals, the house of Grandma Del, and church going with the rural grand-mother. She does not even mention how the older woman looks like physically.

But in section two, as soon as the city upper class grand-mother is introduced, the narrator introduces the issue of looking beautiful through the usage of make-up: "Grandma Elaine says such funny things sometimes. Like she was dressing up to go out last night and she was putting on make-up and I said … Grandma, 'Grandma? You shouldn't paint your face like that you know, it is written in the Bible that it is a sin.'' This is part of the teaching the narrator has received from her rural grand-mother. The city grandmother reacts by telling the little girl that Grandma Del is "a country bumpkin of the deepest waters and don't quote her goddamn sayings to me" (Brown 162). The narrator does not understand how this woman can consider herself better than grandma Del. It is because the issue of social class is also seen in terms of town people versus rural people. Grandma Dell, her yard, her domestic animals, the many visitors and passersby, her church going, are symbolic of the rural class and setting. Grandma Elaine, her world of make-up, her boyfriends, her neglect of church going, represent the urban modern world.

Generally, church going is seen as *classy*. For example, in The Thursday Wife, also from a Jamaican woman writer, Hazel D. Campbell, the main character insists on church activities as a means of being different from other poorer women. As the narrator of the story says, "… she could always manage to find a little something to take for those poorer than herself and earn a name as an angel of Mercy" (Brown 37). But in The Two Grandmothers, it is the woman who considers herself as a classy woman who curses and does not care about church going. There is an intertwinement and confusion in values that make one part of an upper class or not. Elaine as a symbol of the upper class, uses make-up, has boyfriends, is worried about her age and her physical look. In fact, she thinks that grandma Del is unlike her and she is better than the country bumpkin as she calls her. The narrator is caught in these contradictory views of what is deemed good or not good. The result is a psychosocial confusion of values for the narrator.

For example, Maureen thinks she is better than the narrator because she is a mulato, she has softer hair, and light skin. But when the narrator is with grandma Del, she has a different view of herself because she

believes she is beautiful. Once she finds herself with her mulato cousin, she starts losing her self-esteem. The child narrator thinks she is not beautiful because she does not look like Maureen. In her essay, *'Let them know you have broughtupcy': Childhood and child subjects in Olive Senior's Short Stories,* Helen Gilbert considers children as "the foci of race, class and gender specific processes in the family, as objects of regulation . . . as targets of religious indoctrination, as sites of social anxiety (24-25). Discussing Zig-Zag, another short story by Senior, Gilbert opines that "Senior communicates the pervasive anxiety that shadows middle/upper class children whose observable physical features betray makers of blackness" (Gilbert, 29). It is this pervasive anxiety that the narrator in The Two Grandmothers' experiences. While some women of her community find her desirable, others think she is just a nigger. Amid this anxiety, there is no adult who can understand her and ease her confusion and anxiety. Her biological mother listens to her questions but never answers them. The urban grandmother is busy enjoying her modern upper-class life and criticizing the rural one. The latter tries to help the child-narrator gain some self-esteem but she has a wrong approach, which consists in criticizing some women who appreciate the narrator. In other words, she bothers herself too much about the so-called low morality of other women. At the end of the story, the nameless girl-narrator, symbol of the traumatizing confusion of values, still does not have appropriate answers to her questions.

V. Conclusion

Through the story, the narrator stands in a crossroad that allows the reader to have access to the lives of the women and all the inter-judgements they have on each other. The reading of the narrator's interaction with other women reflects how, due to slavery and colonialism, two key Caribbean experiences, women continue to be victims of these historical experiences. In fact, the new notions of BCC, remnants of history, continue to have a strong impact on the women. Each time the author handles one of the trio themes, the other two are brought into light because of their inter-relatedness and intertwinement.The author has managed to reach her aim through the view of a child which "is not childlike. It is a clear vision through which the irrationalities of adults, the inequities in society and from time to time the redeeming features of the environment, are expressed(Pollard 540).

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