

***Racial Identity***  
***In Rita Dove's Poetry***

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***Discussion***

The study of race in poetry is, in my view, a new genre which, to date, has not received widespread critical attention, though it is increasingly being noted in contemporary studies. To describe it as simply racial is neither adequate nor apt. At the same time, the staunch racial aspect cannot be ignored because of the reality it reflects. Studies about race and racism can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century, at least in relation to the United States of America.

This study, then, analyses the work of writers who employ formal literary effects in order to establish the identity of a people. Racial identity, or the poetics of identity, is a characteristic term used to describe "the black poet's participation in a pattern of thinking that links writing to people by first locating in that writing a people's distinctive effects"(Kerkering, 2003: 2). This term, racial identity, is composed of two important factors; race and identity. Whereas the first links it to the black people in the world, and especially America; the second constitutes the process of self-definition

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## **Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr**

**Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman**

resulted from the oppression, suffering, and discrimination as being a member of the black race.

Therefore, a black poet like Rita Dove, or any other black writer in America, would realize that the fact of her blackness becomes one of the crucial and primary factors that play an important role in the formation of her identity as a poet. "Any black writer in America must confront, as an adult, the enraging truth that the inescapable social accusation of blackness becomes, too early for the child to resist it, a strong element of inner self-definition." (Vendler, 1995: 61) A black writer thus composes with and against racial identity.

Henry Louis Gates, an American critic, speaks of how "race" was defined. Gates notes that "race" was a "thing, a characteristic based upon natural differences, which irresistibly determined the shape and form of thought and feelings as surely as it did the shape and form of human anatomy" (Gates, 1998: 54). This "thing" called "race" was then seen as a determinant factor for all other criterion – a person's biological colour, language, beliefs, artistic traditions, athletic ability, mental ability, to name a few. Immanuel Kant, an American critic wrote that "so fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour" (Brophy, 2002: 3). According to Kant, not only was race a way to explain his mental superiority towards the black race, but he goes so far as to present the black colour as evidence of a stupid black race. This discrimination on the part of the black people has created a breeding ground for racism to

exist and even to become popular and quite worldwide. If groups of individuals continue to set themselves apart due to hair colour, tribal language, or religious sect, then race becomes real racism that is based upon a gross misunderstanding of human kind.

The American culture is a significant carrier of racism as its uses of "black" and "white" come to mean more than colour. The uses of "black" and "white" in America have become, throughout decades, racially charged, specifically how "black" has negative connotations and "white" positive connotations. In Western cultures white brings with it associations of cleanliness, clarity, purity, goodness, and truth. Blackness, on the other hand, has many synonyms, most of them are unfavorable; filthiness, wicked, deadly, foul, obscure, disastrous, and so on. In other words, the terms "white" and "black" are giving just the opposite meanings as: "purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil" (Solomos, 2001: 23). Moreover, many other meanings of the term "black" are directly related to "race" such as "Negro", "nigger", and "darkey".

Notions of black as negative and white as positive go back further than the present time. These notions became institutionalized in the language of the Bible and in the language of Shakespeare. Ali A. Mazrui finds the use of "black" as a metaphor for "evil", "void", and "death" within the English language worldwide. Since Christianity is a religion made victorious mostly through the efforts of white people, as Mazrui argues, "then angels became white and the

## **Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr**

**Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman**

devil black " (Mazrui, 1989: 165). " black" as " void" arises from the idea that blacks had no history, that their continent was living through a " dark age, " one of barbarism and primitivism.

In both Julius Caesar and Macbeth, Shakespeare equates " black" with " death". In Julius Caesar, " The black sentence" (4. 1) is a sentence of death against those associated with the assassination of Caesar. In Macbeth, Malcolm refers to Macbeth as " Black Macbeth" (4. 3), suggesting his soul is set on only murder and death.

Closely related to race is the conception of slavery and its long history in America. Slavery which started early in 1517 and in America in 1619, forms a prominent example of the constant underestimation of the black people and their prevalent association with the concept of evil. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, " Court Rulings established the racial basis of the American incarnation of slavery to apply chiefly to black Africans. And asserts that most slaves were black and were held by whites" (Solomos, 2001: 31). The blacks were considered as the inferior race and thus they were turned into slaves for the assumed superior whites.

The main criteria, then, for a black poet living in Western societies, and especially the American one, for defining himself as a black poet, is to reflect his identity, whether consciously or unconsciously, in his poetry. Once Toni Morrison, an American black novelist states that clearly when she says: " I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black"(Kerkering, 2003: 5).

James Weldon Johnson, An American poet and critic, whose "preface" to "The Book of American Negro Poetry" asserts that the "Colored poet... needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor." (Brophy, 2002: 4) When Toni Morrison speaks of "a way of writing" that is "irrevocably black" and James Weldon Johnson speaks of a "form that... will still hold the racial flavor" they each link their writing to a particular people, vs. , the black race. In these examples, what determines the race of the writing is "the presence within it of certain race-specific effects." (Kerkering, 2003: 8) For both of these writers, then, the racial identity of certain literary effects is responsible for conferring racial identity on a larger piece of writing. Rita Dove herself even speaks of race in order to set herself apart. She is quoted, in an interview in *People*, an American magazine, as saying "I'm a woman and a black and I write out of that." (Brophy, 2002: 5).

In doing so, writers, like Dove and Morrison, offer what seems to be a different account of themselves, linking their own group identities not to literary effects but to the circumstances and choices that led each of them to affiliate with a group. Dove, for instance, was born into a family subject to the racism endemic to American society, and she has chosen to continue her solidarity with those who, like her, have been marginalized due to their colour.

This, in fact, raises another important issue for black poets whether to follow this type of racial writing or to transcend it in favor of a more national and universal one. It is true that by choosing to be "racial", a black poet would constrict the

## Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr

Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

scope of his readers and his address would not be a universal one directed to humanity. And I believe no poet would like to do that. Therefore, African American writers are chief among those non-white writers called upon to " transcend racial identity in order to gain entrance to a universal literary language to which their white counterparts appear to have immediate and uninterrupted access. "(Cruze, 2002: 6).

Rita Dove attempts to reconcile these contradictions between the American identity and her African American background by ignoring both identities; the national and the racial. But like a shadow lingering behind her words, racial identity creeps up and demands attention. One can perceive in her poetry certain race-specific markers which bear witness to the fact of her blackness. In other words, Dove is unable to disregard her racialism as the personae in many poems of her poetry are determined by race and her uses of black and white images advocate racialism against her own people.

Rita Dove is the first black and youngest author to serve as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. She considers herself the heir of Phillis Wheatley, slave poet of the colonial era. A complex intellectual, Dove has edited *Callaloo*, *Gettysburg Review*, and *Triquarterly* and served at Harvard on the Afro-American Studies Visiting Committee while producing some of the twentieth century's most controlled, viscerally satisfying imagery. She has earned praise for concrete immediacy. Her verse springs out of everyday images and shards of sounds, thought, and long nurtured memory.

Dove was born in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1952. She discovered her gift for word manipulation in early childhood. Dove intended to make the most of her talent. In 1979, she married the novelist Fred Viebahn, father of their daughter, Aviva Chantal, and translator of German editions of Dove's verse. Blending political undercurrent into personal memoir, she began submitting to national poetry journals and published *The Only Dark Spot in the Sky* (1980) and a poetic slave memoir entitled *The Yellow House in the Corner* (1980). While teaching at the University of Arizona, she composed *Museum* (1983), a hymn to history and culture that moved toward a more mature expression beyond the limitations of personal experience. The height of this collection is " Parsley", a depiction of Rafael Trujillo's slaughter of twenty thousands of Caribbean blacks on the basis of their pronunciation of *perijil*, the Spanish word for parsley. Dove reached literary maturity with a dramatic work, *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), a forty-four poem tribute to her Southern-born maternal grandparents. The work reads like a novel. Dove followed with *The Other Side of the House* (1988) and *Grace Notes* (1989); juxtaposed with short fiction in *Fifth Sunday* (1985); a novel, *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992); and a verse drama, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994). (Steffen, 2001: 45).

My first example of the racial identity in Dove's poetry would be " The House Slave", in which she imagines the times when the blacks were held slaves for the whites who used to force them working in the farms from the early hours

## Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr

Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

of the day till the evening without any mercy. The slaves were kept in ' quarters' and used to be awaked at the sound of horns:

*The first horn lifts its arm over the dew-lit grass,*

*And in the slave quarters there is a rustling-*

*Children are bundled into aprons, cornbread.*

The slaves were treated as animals being kept in large stables that one may hear them "rustling" inside. The second impression one may draw from these initial lines is the image of prison " quarters" in which the slaves are kept like prisoners and being waked up by horns. In the second stanza, the poet imagines herself one of them hiding in one of these quarters and watching:

*... water gourds grabbed, a salt pork breakfast taken,*

*I watch them driven into the vague before dawn,*

*While their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick.*

The slaves are given their breakfast and water and are driven to the fields to work. Their destination, for the poet, is vague and one may associate the blackness of the dawn and the vagueness of the destination with the blackness of the slaves. Dove, then, contradicts them with the " ivory" whiteness of their " mistress" who sleeps late at noon. The association of these colours is not to be taken simply since it forms the background against which Dove draws her images. The " ivory" whiteness of the mistress denotes not only her white skin, but also the toughness and cruelty of her character which drives her to order that the blacks should be whipped to work even harder:

*... at the second horn,*

*The whip curls across the backs of the laggards-  
 Sometimes my sister's voice, unmistaken among them.  
 "Oh! Pray, " she cries. "Oh! Pray!" those days  
 I lie on my cot, shivering in the early heat,  
 And as the fields unfold to whiteness,  
 And they spill like bees among the fat flowers,  
 I weep. It is not yet daylight.*

The solution for these people, as it is clear in this poem, is to "pray" for a way out, or asking the others to pray for them. But the others are as helpless as they are and they can only "weep" for them.

Dove, then, and in her book *The Yellow House in the Corner* (1980), identifies with an African female slave petitioning in 1782 to be set free:

*I am Belinda, an African,  
 Since the age of twelve a slave.  
 I will not take too much of your time,  
 But to plead and place my pitiable life  
 Unto the fathers of this nation.*

In these lines, Belinda identifies herself by two race-specific markers; that she is an African female, and that she is a slave. Belinda's sole dream is to be liberated from the chains of slavery of the superior whites. Belinda's wish manifests the blacks' inability to do anything for their freedom and they have to ask for it. Similarly, another slave speaks of his decision not to escape as he thinks that it is useless and that he does not have any reason to do so:

*Ain't got a reason,  
 To run away-*

## Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr

Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

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*Leastways, not one  
Would save my life.  
So I scoop speculation,  
Into a hopsack.  
I scoop fluff till,  
The ground rears white  
And I'm the only dark  
Spot in the sky.*

The slave here expresses his despair tinged with a religious, or probably anti-religious, sense as he thinks that it is his fate to be black and thus slave. In the last two lines of this extract, Dove uses black and white images to express the process of self-definition which the speaker failed to complete. The persona in Dove's poetry is unable to understand the reason that everything can be transformed into whiteness- that is cleanness, goodness, independence- but only him who is doomed to be " the only dark spot in the sky". This black-white contradiction brings with it the associations of black as evil and white as goodness stated early in this study.

In " Banneker", a poem written to the memory of Benjamin Banneker (1731-1906) " the first black man to create an almanac and predict a solar eclipse; appointed to the commission that designed Washington D. C. "(Vendler, 1995: 65) Rita Dove tackles the theme of racial discrimination as the citizens of Baltimore could not understand how a black man can have such a mental ability:

*Venerable, the good people of Baltimore*

*Whispered, shocked and more than*

*A little afraid. ...*

The white citizens react here as if a black man was not worthy of respect or dignity, especially since they were unaware of both his intelligence and occupation. Therefore, they ascribe his long hours of meditation to "Strong drink" (6) as whites could not realize that a black man would stay out all night except to drink. Dove here is an advocate for Banneker in that she makes clear Banneker's identity confusion is a result of the white people's shock, fear, and perhaps feelings of intellectual inferiority.

Banneker, to Dove, is simply misunderstood as a drunk vagabond who does not belong to Baltimore as he does not belong to America. False rumors and gossip corrupt his image within the community. Resentment is perhaps a factor as Dove describes Banneker as both "capacious" (14), able to contain much knowledge, and like a free "bird"(14) in an environment where slavery encaged many of Banneker's fellow blacks.

We hear little of Banneker's own voice and only secondhand from Dove. He is seen as both a scientific hero and a hero for his people or "race". Dove tells us: "he imagined/ the reply, polite and rhetorical," (17-18) after penning an "enflamed"(15) letter to President Jefferson. "A wife? No thank you." (24) Dove could be predicting Banneker's own words here. Banneker's thoughts and words are active and heated. He is also realistic in that he predicts Jefferson's reaction to merely be a political, candy-coated response that changes nothing. By rejecting the assumption that he should have a wife, little is learned of Banneker's own determination in life, but the fact

## **Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poem**

**Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman**

that Banneker can choose one way or the other, says a great deal about a black man living in slavery-ridden America.

Dove's uses of "black" and "white" in the last stanza of "Banneker" are both "negatively traditional and refreshingly revolutionary" (Brophy, 2002: 7). Dove describes Banneker as a "White-maned figure stalking the darkened breast of the union" (34-36). As a "white-maned" figure, Banneker is described literally here, as he is probably an older man perhaps possessing wisdom, knowledge, and some authority (as would a male lion). If the phrase is only taken literally, no comments on "race" are warranted. If the combination of "white" and "maned" are dissected, however, one can see how Dove falls into the trappings of "white" as supreme, particularly supremely intellectual. I believe her use of "white-maned" has both positive and negative connotations, for her main character is black, yet takes on white-controlled traits of dominance (intellectual and social). In addition, Dove's use of "stalking" to describe Banneker's position suggests blackness as "evil".

Dove's discussion of dark elements also has both positive and negative meaning. The union is described using both nurturing and poisonous terms. The new country is "darkened" "perhaps by its exclusive, elitist language of liberty and justice for all and yet, it is also described as breast- perhaps evoking images of a nurturing mother that included the outcast Banneker in their commission to build Washington D. C." (Brophy, 2002: 9) Dove's use of nighttime here evokes sentiments of black as "death", but at the same time, the black breast presents a nurturing, protective, and life-giving image.

In " Parsley", Dove attempts to rework a historical incident in the Haitian black history. Her penetratingly imaginative mind takes on the task of investigating blackness by moving out of the predicament of African- Americans, looking instead at a more universal one. "Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic, ordered twenty thousand migrant Haitian cane-cutters killed because they could not pronounce the Spanish [r] properly. The test was the word " perejil", the Spanish word for parsley"(Vendler, 2995: 67). The Haitians, speaking French, could not roll their 'r's' in the Spanish fashion; and as each failed the test of saying 'perejil' correctly, he or she was killed.

*There is a parrot imitating spring  
 In the palace, its feathers parsley green.  
 Out of the swamp the cane appears.  
 To haunt us, and we cut it down. El General  
 Searches for a word; he is all the world  
 There is. Like a parrot imitating spring,  
 We lie down screaming as rain punches through  
 And we come up green. We cannot speak an R-  
 Out of the swamp, the cane appears.  
 And then the mountain we call in whispers katalina.  
 The children gnaw their teeth to arrowheads.  
 There is a parrot imitating spring.  
 El General has found his word: perejil.  
 Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining  
 Out of the swamp. The cane appears  
 In our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.  
 And we lie down. For every drop of blood*

## Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr

Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

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*There is a parrot imitating spring*

*Out of the swamp the cane appears.*

The poem is divided into two parts. Each part depicts an image of life totally different from the other. The first is of the Haitian workers in the cane fields who are working hard to earn their living. The second of a deranged dictator looking for no reason to kill.

The first part, "The Cane Fields", draws an image of the Haitian black workers and the difficulties of their life. In this part, Dove characteristically opens a poem with an oblique and unexplained line. The continuous reappearance of the fast-growing sugar-cane from the swamp, no matter how often it is cut down, is enacted, musically, in the exhausting persistence of the phrase " the cane reappears". This first image emphasizes the continuity of life despite the General's moody attempts to stop it. From another perspective, it enriches the feeling of monotony in observing the lives of these workers whose work does not seem to end.

The second part clarifies the mysteries presented in the first one. "It reveals that the parrot had belonged to the General's dead mother, and that in her village when a woman bore a son, the men of the town wore celebratory sprigs of parsley in their capes"(Vendler, 1995: 68). The general deranged since his mother's death, and hearing the parrot repeatedly call his name in her voice, feels that he, as her son, is dishonoured by the presence in his country of people who cannot pronounce her language, cannot, with the word 'parsley', celebrate his male

existence. The General, too, lives in the continual anxiety of the obsessive-compulsive; his relief comes by killing.

*The General*

*Pulls on his boots, he stomps to  
Her room in the palace, the one without  
Curtains, the one with a parrot  
In a brass ring. As he paces he wonders  
Who can I kill today. And for a moment  
The little knot of screams  
Is still*

He orders, for the parrot, his mothers favourite pastries, and as they arrive, " the knot in his throat starts to twitch. " He hears the Haitians singing a Spanish song, " Mi madre, mi amor en muerte" and is irritated by their inability to pronounce its 'r's':

*He hears*

*The Haitians sing without R's  
As they swing the great machetes:  
Katalina, they sing, katalina.*

Then he remembers his mother and her ability in pronouncing this letter as compared to the deficiency of these black people who could not pronounce a letter that even a parrot can:

*God knows*

*His mother was no stupid woman; she  
Could roll an R like a queen. Even  
A parrot can roll an R! in the bare room  
The bright feathers arch in a parody  
Of greenery, as the last pale crumbs  
Disappear under the blackened tongue. Someone*

## Racial Identity In Rita Dove's Poetr

Asst. Salih Abdullah Abdulrahman

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*Calls out his name in a voice  
So like his mother's, a startled tear  
Splashes the tip of his right boot.  
My mother, my love in death.  
The General remembers the tiny green sprigs  
Men of his village wore in their capes  
To honor the birth of a son. He will  
Order many. This time, to be killed*

### ***For a single, beautiful word.***

The General's mental instability and derangement motivate him to make a kind of a word-test. He chooses the word " perejil", which refers to the celebratory of his masculinity and starts a mass executions of black emigrants in order to honour the memory of his dead mother. Rita Dove, in a feat of sympathetic imagination, "enters the white dictators mind, and conjectures a sinisterly plausible motive for the mass executions of blacks based on a bizarre word-test. "(Vendler, 1995: 68) The poem represents, in Dove's career, a dramatic advance, imaginatively speaking, in the treatment of blackness. And although she is nowhere to be seen in this poem, one can feel her affiliation with the Haitian victims who do not have any sin except their skin colour. And as a black poet, she feels that she is part of that history which characterize a certain racial group with which she identifies her identity.

It is true that Rita Dove attempts to transcend these racial limitations which restrict her potentialities as a poet by

narrowing her scope and her audience. Nevertheless, race continues to make a special appearance in her poetry as it makes its way to the heritage of people of colour in America. Non-white people are the ones represented as writing about racialized experience when they write about any experience at all. Black American identity continues to be differentiated from a plain American identity, and as Barrett argues, "blackness is positioned as excess in relation to a more 'legitimate' and significant presence known as whiteness"(Kerkering, 2003: 19). Therefore, Dove uses the black history as a rich source for her poetry and when she decided to turn her face away from racialism by using what T. S. Eliot calls the "objective correlative", she was actually using black-white images and their contradictions to express her themes of inequality, discrimination and oppression practiced against the black people. It is impossible, I think, for any writer, and especially the black ones, to escape their identity and one would still feel, if not perceive, certain aspects of the identity of the writer declaring his presence in his work.

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## الهوية العرقية في شعر ريتا دوف

م. صالح عبد الله

### المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة العلاقة بين العرق، و مظاهره المختلفة، و الأعمال الأدبية للكتاب السود بصورة عامة و الشاعرة الأميركية ريتا دوف بصورة خاصة. تفترض هذه الدراسة أن العرق، أو سواد البشرة، يترك أثرا واضحا في الأعمال الأدبية للكتاب السود و ذلك لأنه يترك بصماته في تلك الأعمال والتي تدعى المؤثرات الخاصة بالعرق. هذه المؤثرات، من ناحية أخرى، هي مظاهر لهوية الكاتب و حضوره في النص الذي يكتبه. حيث يضمن الكاتب الأسود، واعيا أو غير واع، محددات عرقية معينة تشير إلى هويته. و هو يفعل ذلك لأنه مدرك تماما لهاجس أميركا بالعرق أو لكونه ضحية لذلك الهاجس. و عليه فان الكاتب الأسود يؤسس هوية مجموعة من الناس التي ينتمي إليها. و مع ذلك، فان ريتا دوف تحاول أن تسمو فوق هذه الحواجز العرقية من اجل الهوية الوطنية أو العالمية التي تروق لكل البشر على اختلاف أعراقهم. إلا أن المؤثرات العرقية لا تزال تزحف في كتاباتها كالظل و تستدعي ظهورا خاصا لأن ريتا دوف تكتب من تجربتها كشاعرة و إنسانة سوداء و من تأريخ السود و من تجارب و معاناة الناس السود.