



The Psychological Construction of Racial Superiority in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

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Abstract: This article analyses the psychological construction of racial superiority in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. It shows how white characters psychologically succeed in professing and claiming superiority over black characters. Psychoanalysis, the literary theory used for our analyses, enabled us to find out that white characters focus on unfounded racial considerations such as prejudices, stereotypes and racial slurs to make colored people feel inferior by denying them of any qualities and values. This psychological mechanism leads them to express a complex of superiority over Blacks. Such a situation automatically results in Blacks' complex of inferiority, which is noticeable through their self-hatred, a loss of their self-esteem and a strong long for white identity. These antithetic complexes have an impact on the way skin colour is perceived by people in society. In the collective consciousness, white skin and black skin are diametrically opposed in terms of social meaning. On the one hand, people unconsciously associate values, rights, qualities, power and privileges to white skin. On the other hand, they associate black skin colour with subordination, worthlessness and powerlessness.

Keywords: complex, inferiority, psychology, race, superiority.

Construction psychologique de la supériorité raciale dans *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* de James Weldon Johnson

Résumé : Cet article analyse la construction psychologique de la supériorité raciale dans *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. Il montre comment les personnages blancs parviennent à affirmer et à revendiquer leur supériorité sur les personnages noirs. La psychanalyse, utilisée comme méthode d'analyse, nous a permis de découvrir que les personnages blancs se fondent sur les considérations raciales erronées telles que les préjugés, les stéréotypes et les insultes racistes pour inférioriser les personnages de couleur dans l'optique de leur nier une quelconque valeur ou qualité. Ce mécanisme psychologique les amène à exprimer un complexe de supériorité sur les Noirs. Cette situation entraîne systématiquement un complexe d'infériorité chez les Noirs. Ce complexe se manifeste chez les personnages noirs à travers leur haine de soi, la perte de leur estime de soi et surtout leur désir d'avoir une identité blanche. Ces complexes antithétiques ont un impact considérable sur la perception de la couleur de la peau en société. Dans la conscience collective, les significations sociales des couleurs de peau blanche et noire sont diamétralement opposées. D'une part, les individus associent inconsciemment la couleur de peau blanche aux valeurs, droits, qualités, pouvoir et privilèges. D'autre part, ils associent la couleur de peau noire à la subordination, à l'absence de valeurs et à l'impuissance.

Mots clés : complexe, infériorité, psychologie, race, supériorité.

Introduction

Racial diversity caused the classification of races on the basis of the most visible physical criterion, which is skin colour. This classification resulted in the arbitrary hierarchization of human races. Indeed, many theoreticians developed some pseudo-scientific theories to deny the equality of races in order to facilitate the supremacy of the white race over the black race. Thus, differences between human races paved the way for notions of inferior race and superior race. These notions result from various biological, cultural and sociological interpretations by scientists such as Arthur de Gobineau and Charles Darwin, who developed theories to demonstrate the superiority of the white race over the black race. Their racial theories, which were arbitrarily founded on prejudices and stereotypes, caused social problems like slavery, colonization and racial segregation. As a matter of fact, Joseph Healy states: "In the past, race has been widely misunderstood. The false ideas and exaggerated importance attached to race have not been mere error logic, subject to debate and refutation. At various time and places, they have been associated with some of the greatest tragedies in human history, massive exploitation and mistreatment. (Healy, 2010, p. 21)

Even today, racial considerations that originate from racial hierarchy are the causes of many social conflicts all over the world, particularly in multiracial societies. Whites' desire to maintain and perpetuate the cycle of supremacy over Blacks leads them to deny colored people of basic rights, social privileges and opportunities. This denial, which is considered unjust by the victims of racism, not only results in racial conflicts, but it also causes new forms of violence. In the United States of America, this violence is observable through police violence against Blacks every year. Such a situation shows that unfounded ideas associated with race are still rooted in people's minds and represent an obstacle to the peaceful relationship between Whites and Blacks in many multiracial societies. In the American society, these false ideas related to race were used by Whites to claim their superiority over Blacks in order to exercise their supremacy in all social fields. In other words, they made profit from prejudices and stereotypes associated with race to psychologically construct their superiority over Blacks to maintain and defend a system of wealth, power and privilege. In his novel entitled *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, James Weldon Johnson portrays the psychological construction of this superiority through the experience of his nameless protagonist, who is referred to as "The Ex-Coloured Man". How do white characters succeed in claiming their superiority over black characters in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*? Why are they eager to profess their superiority in their daily interaction with Blacks? To what extent do the complexes related to race influence the characters' perception of skin colour in society? This paper purports to show how racial superiority is psychologically constructed in the novel under study. To achieve our objective, we will use

psychoanalysis as method of analysis. Thanks to this method developed by Sigmund Freud, we will not only shed light on the unconscious motivations of white characters who claim superiority over black characters, but we will also show the impact of their claim on race relations. Our outline is as follows: firstly, we will analyze Whites' complex of superiority. Secondly, we will examine Blacks' complex of inferiority. Finally, we will investigate the psychology of skin colour that prevails in our corpus.

1. Whites' Complex of Superiority

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, prejudices, stereotypes towards Blacks and mixed-race people lead Whites to consider themselves superior to people who have a black skin colour. In their social interaction with colored people, Whites not only belittle them, but they also deny them of any qualities. For them, qualities and progress should always be associated with the white skin colour. They boast themselves about their superiority and represent Blacks like people who are incompatible with superiority norms. Such a situation leads Whites to assert that Blacks should inherit social conditions related to their natural inferiority. Consequently, in Whites' collective consciousness, Blacks can never detach themselves from their natural attributes of inferiority. The Texan, who is the embodiment of white supremacists in the novel under study, sheds light on Whites' claim for superiority over Blacks when he states:

- (1) If he's inferior and weaker, and is shoved to the wall, that's his own look-out [...] That's the law of nature; and he's bound to go to the wall; for no race in the world has ever been able to stand competition with the Anglo-Saxon. The Anglo-Saxon race has always been and always will be the masters of the world, and the niggers in the South ain't going to change all the records of history. (p. 161)

From whites' belief in the natural inferiority of Blacks, it is clear that in their minds, they have a natural right to consider themselves superior to Blacks. Thus, individual qualities are not recognized in society. This society rather promotes white skin colour. Under such circumstances, superiority is a quality that a black person cannot long for since people biologically inherit it only if they have a white skin colour. This is the reason why Whites treat Blacks with contempt. The quality of a person in this multiracial society presented by Johnson is exclusively determined by skin colour. Through Whites' eagerness to monopolize qualities and values in the multiracial society, their fear to be dominated by Blacks is perceptible. Indeed, when claiming superiority over Blacks, Whites want to make Blacks unconsciously accept that the superiority of the white race is a natural and an everlasting reality. Behind their complex of superiority, they also reveal their fear to inherit Blacks' fate. This explains why white characters reject the idea of equality between the races. As a matter of fact, talking about a possible equality between Whites and Blacks, The Texan argues:

(2) You might argue from now until hell freezes over, and you might convince me that you're right, but you will never convince me that I'm wrong. All you say sounds very good, but it's got nothing to do with facts. You can say what men ought to be, but they ain't that; so there you are. Down here in the South we're up against facts, and we're meeting 'em like facts. We don't believe the nigger is or ever will be the equal of the white man, and we ain't going to treat him as an equal. (p. 164)

The Texan's attitude shows that Whites always profess their superiority over Blacks to dissuade the latter ones from claiming equality in society. Thus, when they notice that there is advancement in the black racial group, they endeavour to dispossess Blacks of opportunities that contribute to their advancement. For example, they refuse to give jobs to Blacks. They have this behaviour because they think that Blacks' advancement can put their status of superior individuals in jeopardy. Therefore, to preserve their "natural superiority", Whites are obliged to refuse to grant social privileges to Blacks. From Whites' unwillingness to see any social change in the black racial group, it is obvious that racial considerations have caused a social psychology in the white racial group. In fact, in white characters' psyche, the id represents Blacks as potential threats, rivals and enemies that may prevent them from fulfilling their desire for racial supremacy. Their racist attitude towards Blacks is a strategy to set up their hegemony that will allow them to stand as the masters in society. So, Whites' complex of superiority hides their fear of losing power in society. Alfred Adler corroborates this idea when he argues that the complex of superiority is a mechanism of psychological defense in which an individual's feelings of superiority fill his feelings of inferiority. (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 259)

Moreover, this complex of superiority expressed by white characters can be analyzed as a means that enables them to widen the social gaps between them and Blacks. For them, superior people should not have the same social conditions as inferior people. This psychological state inevitably leads to the social exclusion of Blacks. The *Ex-Coloured Man* reveals the true meaning of Whites' complex of superiority as follows:

(3)When the white race assumes as hypothesis that it is the main object of creation and that all things else are merely subsidiary to its well-being, sophism, subterfuge, perversion of conscience, arrogance, injustice, oppression, cruelty, sacrifice of human blood, all are required to maintain the position, and its dealings with other races become indeed a problem, a problem which, if based on a hypothesis of common humanity, could be solved by the simple rules of justice. (pp.166-167)

From this statement, we perceive the reasons why Whites overtly express their complex of superiority over Blacks. Indeed, behind this complex, their aim is to monopolize all the social resources. In Whites' collective consciousness, if they succeed in making Blacks psychologically accept the superiority of the white race, they will easily accept their subordination without protesting. Thus, it is clear that in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, white characters profess

their superiority over black characters in order to facilitate their hegemony in a multiracial society where power requires racial politics. This complex of superiority also reveals that white characters long for unquestionable power. In reality, they want to escape from their psychological state of inferiority imposed by the presence of people belonging to another racial group. According to Adler (1964, p. 13): "this natural psychological feeling of inferiority is a psychopathology, which is observable in the behaviour of all human beings". Consequently, Whites try to get rid of this psychopathology when they devalue Blacks. In other words, to develop a feeling or a complex of superiority over Blacks, Whites are compelled to consider them inferior.

As we can notice, Whites' complex of superiority is rooted in their psyche. Manonni explains Whites' attitude to consider themselves superior to Blacks when he writes: "The inferior human being is just a scapegoat: he receives the bad intentions, which are projected on him." Mannoni (1984, p. 99). This attitude is typical of The Texan in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. He always claims his superiority over Blacks. Apart from that, he has a deep-rooted hatred for colored people. His hostility towards the black race shows that he suffers from a complex of inferiority he represses by devaluing Blacks. Psychologically, he represents Blacks as people who should play negative roles in society. Whenever he notices that a black person is making social progress, he inferiorizes him / her by considering himself more important. Therefore, his complex of superiority enables him to be socially better classed than any colored person. He simply wants all black people to be dependent on Whites. The Ex-Coloured Man sheds light on this idea when he states:

(4) The American Negro constitutes what is really an obstacle in the way of the thoughtful and progressive element of the race. His character has been established as a happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being [...] His efforts to elevate himself socially are looked upon as a sort of absurd caricature of "white civilization". (p. 168)

The complex of superiority leads Whites to overtly materialize the representations of Blacks lying in their psyche. Indeed, in their quest for social power, the Texan and the other racist characters in Johnson's novel consider Blacks as their opponents. In such a perspective, they perceive Blacks like enemies they have to dominate. Thus, whites are under psychological pressure that instill in them the desire to permanently express a complex of superiority over Blacks. That pressure motivates them to consider all the attributes related to the black race worthless in order to negotiate and consolidate their racial supremacy. In so doing, the Texan encourages all the actions that dispossess Blacks of their self-esteem and dignity. The Ex-Coloured Man's patron alludes to this dispossession caused by Whites' eagerness to express their superiority over Blacks when he declares:

(5) We light upon one evil and hit it with all the might of our civilization, but only succeed in scattering it into a dozen other forms. We hit slavery through a great civil war. Did we destroy it? No, we only changed it into hatred between sections of the country [...] the degradation of the blacks through peonage, unjust laws, unfair and cruel treatment. (p 146)

The psychological pressure of domination also leads white characters to hurl insults at black characters. Generally, these insults are racial slurs such as “nigger” and “barbaric” used by Whites to make Blacks feel inferior. These pejorative words used to qualify Blacks have a significant negative impact on them. Indeed, Blacks are daily bombarded with these devaluing words that they psychologically internalize their inferiority as a natural fact and admit Whites’ racial superiority. Whites purposely use racial slurs not only to inflict psychological pain on Blacks, but they also use them to prevent Blacks from developing feelings of racial pride. So, to be unquestionable masters of the multiracial society and feel superior to Blacks, white characters unconsciously treat black characters like second class citizens. This situation results in psychological and physical violence against Blacks. The Ex-Coloured Man reveals the incidence of Whites’ complex of superiority on violence against Blacks when he describes a lynching scene as follows:

(6) Fuel was brought from everywhere, oil, the torch; the flames crouched for an instant as though to gather strength, then leaped up as high as their victim’s head. He squirmed, he writhed, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear. The cries and groans were choked off by the fire and smoke; but his eyes, bulging from their sockets, rolled from side to side, appealing in vain for help. (p. 187)

Whites administer this inhuman treatment to Blacks in order to psychologically affect the black race. Indeed, lynching scenes cause Blacks’ traumatization. They are shocked and unconsciously consider themselves inferior to their oppressors. Their killings are the most overt forms of their inferiorization. With this racial violence, they are compelled to accept their inferiority psychologically and remain speechless in order not to challenge Whites’ hegemony in society. Behind this treatment that Blacks are victims of, Whites’ fear of inheriting Blacks’ condition is noticeable. So, in their relationship with Blacks, Whites endeavor to make them feel powerless and incapable of claiming equality between the races. Wiegman perceives this reality when he puts forth: “The black man’s potential for equality raised fears among Whites concerning their supremacy and patriarchal privileges.” Wiegman (1995, p. 9)

When The Ex-Coloured Man watches lynching scenes during which Blacks are psychologically affected, he realizes that whites overtly consider Blacks “inferior”. They use lynching scenes as tribunes to materialize their feeling of superiority over Blacks and this dissuades The Ex-Coloured Man from accepting to live with his two racial heritages. In fact, for him, to accept living as a black person is a suicide because of the psychological burden associated with

Whites' attitude of expressing their superiority over Blacks. This leads him to develop feelings of shame to belong to his black racial heritage. He reveals his state of mind following the lynching scene:

(7) 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. My heart turned bitter within me. I could understand why Negroes are led to sympathize with the worst criminals and to protect them when possible (pp. 187-8).

Through this shame, he expresses his desire to escape the black racial universe. Thus, he disassociates himself from the victimized black community, which is considered inferior. This lynching scene that he watches is the complicating action or cardinal function of the plot in the narrative of our corpus. In regard of the label of inferiority that Blacks have to abide by, *The Ex-Coloured Man* is convinced that identifying himself with Blacks is to be dictated by Whites and he has the pressure to settle his mixed heritage burden. To negotiate and maintain their claim for superiority over Blacks, all the white characters are in psychological predispositions to dehumanize colored people. This leads them to haphazardly administer both psychological and physical violence to Blacks. Their complex of superiority motivates them to devalue Blacks in order to make the latter ones admit the superiority of the white race over the black race. To avoid being victim of inferiorization, *The Ex-Coloured Man* made the final decision to choose his white racial heritage after the lynching scene. He confesses:

(8) I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but [...] it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame (pp. 190-191).

As we can notice, White characters' complex of superiority maintain them in psychogenic states that lead them to perceive Blacks like inferior people. Their hostile attitude towards Blacks derive from an external force, which is rooted in their psyche. Their unconscious represent Blacks as opponents they need to defeat in order to exercise their hegemony in society. This desire of supremacy that explains their complex of superiority immediately results in black characters' complex of inferiority.

2. Blacks' Complex of Inferiority

Blacks' complex of inferiority is firstly perceptible through their self-hatred. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, many black characters are not proud of their black skin colour. They lose their self-esteem because of the racial supremacy exercised by Whites. They consider their belonging to the black race as a handicap and perceive their black identity as a curse. For example, *The Ex-*

Coloured Man overtly expresses his uneasiness to belong to the black race. He started to develop a complex of inferiority when he was still a child. Indeed, he considered white skin colour as the colour that confers a feeling of pride. Consequently, despite his status of a mixed-race person, he refused to be associated with black children at school. He confesses his anxiety to belong to the black race when he reveals:

(9) I had no particular like or dislike for these black and brown boys and girls [...] they had occupied very little of my thought; but I do know that when the blow fell, I had a very strong aversion to being classed with them. So I became something a solitary. (p.23)

The Ex-Coloured Man's complex of inferiority unconsciously leads him to disown his African American heritage in order to transgress racial barriers in his childhood. This situation is observable through a psychoanalytic reading of an event he describes as follows:

(10) One day near the end of my second term at school, the principal came into our room and, after talking to the teacher, for some reason said: "I wish all the white scholars to stand for a moment." I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me and, calling my name, said: "You sit down for the present, and rise with the others." I did not quite understand her, and questioned: "Ma'm?" She repeated, with a softer tone in her voice: "You sit down now, and rise with the others". I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise, I did not know it. When school was dismissed, I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying: "Oh, you're a nigger too." (p. 16)

In the above passage, we notice the realization of a repressed desire by The Ex-Coloured Man. Indeed, in the American society, it is impossible to class mulattoes in the white racial group because of the one drop rule. However, with The Ex-Coloured Man's desire to have the same social conditions as Whites, his unconscious expresses a desire of a white identity. This desire, which is unquenchable due to social norms that prevent mulattoes from having a white identity is going to subliminate into a noble desire that can be accepted by society. When the principal asks white students to stand up, the Ex-Coloured Man also stands up and takes advantage of the situation to realize his desire for a white identity. He is later asked by the principal to sit down. The sublimation of the desire for a white identity shows that The Ex-Coloured Man faces a psychic conflict. This desire expressed by his "id" is repressed by his "superego" because of the one drop rule. Eventually, he liberates himself from his psychic conflict after realizing the desire for a white identity under a disguised form. The Ex-Coloured Man's impossibility to socially realize his desire for a white identity leads him to sink into anguish. He does not want to admit his black identity. To get rid of this anguish that psychologically affects him, he expects comfort from his mother who may tell him that he is White. He states:

(11) I ran downstairs and rushed to where my mother was sitting, with a piece of work in her hands. I buried my head in her lap and blurted out: "Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?" I

could not see her face, but I knew the piece of work dropped to the floor and I felt her hands on my head. I looked up into her face and repeated: "Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?" There were tears in her eyes and I could see that she was suffering for me. (pp. 17-18)

Through the series of questions related to his identity, The Ex-Coloured Man wants to be free from his psychological burden, admitting his belonging to the black race as a reality. He fears this reality since his "id" represents the white identity as an ideal. Thus, the complex of inferiority leads Blacks to discredit themselves and lose their self-esteem. They negatively perceive the black skin colour. From black characters' griefs to belong to the black race, we can conclude that Whites' complex of superiority makes them lose any feeling of racial pride. In fact, colored people consider their fate in the multiracial society as a punishment. This is the reason why The Ex-Coloured Man considers the discovery of his black identity as an ordeal. He declares: "Perhaps it had to be done, but I have never forgiven the woman who did it so cruelly. It may be that she never knew that she gave me a sword-thrust that day in school which was years in healing" (p. 19).

It is worth noting that Blacks' complex of inferiority results in their isolation since they become withdrawn. They develop feelings of inexistence in the American society because they consider Whites as natural "masters". Consequently, they think that they are strangers in the multiracial society. They isolate themselves in black communities and avoid any contact with Whites. Their complex of inferiority makes them less sociable and the psychological state of The Ex-Coloured Man corroborates this idea. After discovering his black identity, he avoids approaching his classmates. He gives the reason why he isolates himself when he states:

(12) I now think that this change which came into my life was at first more subjective than objective. I do not think my friends at school changed so much toward me as I did toward them. I grew constantly more and more afraid of laying myself open to some injury to my feelings or my pride. I frequently saw or fancied some slight where, I am sure, none was intended. On the other hand, my friends and teachers were, if anything different, more considerate of me; but I can remember that it was against this very attitude in particular that my sensitiveness revolted. "Red" was the only one who did not so wound me; up to this day I recall with a swelling heart his clumsy efforts to make me understand that nothing could change his love for me. (p. 22)

Moreover, Blacks' complex of inferiority is noticeable through their idealization of Whites. Indeed, black characters admire Whites. They consider Whites as reference norms in whatever they do. Then, they assess their qualities and achievements by comparing themselves to Whites. As a result, Whites are perceived by Blacks like symbols of human values. For them, having a white skin colour amounts to being a Man of quality, a superior human being. This idea explains why The Ex-Coloured Man's mother tries to reassure her child about his quality when he discovers that he is Black. She just tells him about the quality of

his father's skin colour. The Ex-Coloured Man sheds light on this idealization as follows: "Well, mother, am I white? Are you white?" She answered tremblingly; "No I am not white, but you- your father is one of the greatest men in the country. The best blood of the South is in you". (p 18)

The Ex-Coloured Man's mother inferiorizes her own skin colour by comparing it to the white skin colour. To prevent her child from considering himself inferior because of his miscegenation with the black race, she cheers him up by praising the quality of his white father's blood. Black characters denature their identity because of their idealization of the white race. They get rid of their identity markers in order to adopt those of white people. For example, some of them mimic the way Whites speak and other get dressed like them just to develop a feeling of superiority. The Ex-Coloured Man refers to this behaviour in the passage below:

(13) We put up at a hotel in Boston for a couple of days and visited several of my new friend's acquaintances; they were all people of education and culture and, apparently, of means. I could not help being struck by the great difference between them and the same class of colored people in the South. In speech and thought they were genuine Yankees. The difference was especially noticeable in their speech. There was none of that heavy-tongued enunciation which characterizes even the best-educated colored people of the South. It is remarkable, after all, what an adaptable creature the Negro is. I have seen the black West Indian gentleman in London, and he is in speech and manners a perfect Englishman. I have seen natives of Haiti and Martinique in Paris, and they are more Frenchy than a Frenchman. I have no doubt that the Negro would make a good Chinaman, with exception of the pigtail. (p. 153)

This mimicry clearly shows that Blacks long for a white identity in order to develop feelings of superiority. This is the reason why some black characters behave differently when they are in a white environment. They adopt Whites' manners to hide their black identity. Such is the case of The Ex-Coloured Man who adopts two different types of behaviour according to the racial environment. It is in this context that Frantz Fanon states: "The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white Man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro." Fanon (1952, p. 13)

Blacks' complex of inferiority also makes them develop feelings of hatred for people who belong to the white race. Indeed, their incapacity to value themselves and to be always inferiorized by Whites result in their hatred for Whites. They consider them as obstacles to the expression of their "ego" because they prevent them from considering themselves "humans" since all human values are set up by Whites. However, behind their hatred for the white race, Blacks conceal their desire to have a status of "superior" human beings. Thus, their hatred for Whites is the expression of their inaccessible love for the white race. This situation is observable through The Ex-Coloured Man's ambivalent feelings; he hates and loves white people. His ambivalent feelings result from the impossibility to realize the desire of having a white identity that will confer him

attributes of superiority. Black characters' complex of inferiority results in their lack of self-confidence. For them, Whites are unquestionable masters of society. So, they do not dare to compete with any white person. They unconsciously consider their skin colour as a handicap in their quest for social identity. With this psychological predisposition, they already admit defeat whenever they want to compete with Whites. This situation explains why educated black characters just contend themselves with menial jobs. They think that they are worthless because they represent themselves as people who lack qualities. Consequently, their complex of inferiority limit their possibility to emancipate themselves. What is the impact of these complexes of superiority and inferiority on the perception of individuals in each racial group?

3. The Psychology of Skin Colour

Whites' complex of superiority and Blacks' complex of inferiority result in a psychological binarism in people collective consciousness. In fact, the complexes which are opposed have a significant impact on people's perception as far as skin colour is concerned. People associate all valuable things with white skin colour and degrading things with black skin colour. With this psychology of skin colour, white characters define themselves in opposition to black characters and vice-versa. Such a situation is at the basis of antagonistic relations between Whites and Blacks in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. Blacks are psychologically perceived by Whites like "monsters", violent and coward people. In Whites' psyche, black people symbolize "evil". On the contrary, they represent themselves as good people. All social interactions are shaped by antithetic differences between Whites and Blacks. This psychology of skin colour causes a conflictual relationship between the two races and does not facilitate social relations.

Moreover, the psychology of skin colour is obvious in the novel under study through considerations related to the progress of mankind. In the consciousness of white characters, Blacks cannot contribute to that progress. They think that Blacks are not intelligent enough to come out with inventions that can enable mankind to move forward. This is the reason why they believe that they are more intelligent than Blacks. To materialize this belief, they treat all colored people as if they were children. The Texan, a racist character, even attributes all the inventions of mankind to the white race. In his consciousness, Blacks are incapable of creating things for the advancement of society. However, he is contradicted by the old soldier who makes him realize that his beliefs towards the black race result from his misrepresentations. The Old soldier disagrees with The Texan when he argues:

(14) Can you name a single one of the great fundamental and original intellectual achievement which have raised man in the scale of civilization that may be credited to the Anglo-Saxon? The

art of letters, of poetry, of music, of sculpture, of painting, of the drama, of architecture; the science of mathematics, of astronomy, of philosophy, of logic, of physics, of chemistry, the use of the metals, and the principals of mechanics, were all invented or discovered by darker and what we now call inferior races and nations. We have carried many of these to their highest point of perfection, but the foundation was laid by others. Do you know the only original contribution to civilization we can claim is what we have done in steam and electricity and in making implements of war more deadly? Why, we didn't even originate the religion we use. (p. 162)

The Texan's attitude shows that Whites are unwilling to admit Blacks' achievements. They refuse to acknowledge Blacks' contribution to the scientific advancement of the world simply because psychologically, they do not succeed in associating the black race with things of quality. Associating the black skin colour only with degrading things amounts to deny Blacks of any qualities. In this perspective, it is clear that in Whites' psyche Blacks are people whose identity lies on inferiority markers. Thus, they cannot admit any qualities or values in the black race. Frantz Fanon sheds light on this reality in Whites' psyche when he writes:

In all civilized or civilizing countries, the Negro symbolizes sin. The archetype of inferior values is represented by the Negro [...] The Negro serves a function: to represent inferior feelings, the baser instincts, the darker side of the soul. In the collective unconscious of the *homo occidentalis*, the Negro or the black skin symbolizes evil, misery, death, war, famine. Fanon (1952, pp. 153-154)

With this representation of the black skin colour in Whites' psyche, they are compelled to consider Blacks inferior. In this context, colored people do not succeed in asserting their true identity in the multiracial society. Whites impose them a negative identity and they are obliged to discover themselves through the eyes of Whites. Blacks' actions are conditioned by white people because of representations associated with skin colour. Such a situation confers a double consciousness to black characters. With the negative representation of the black skin colour, The Ex-Coloured Man develops a double consciousness on psychological and social levels. He explains his double consciousness in these terms:

(15) I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were coloured, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact. And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every coloured man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the view-point of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view-point of a coloured man. (p. 21)

It is worth noting that this double consciousness caused by the psychology of skin colour prevents The Ex-Coloured Man from affirming himself in society and he suffers from his twoness. He is permanently rejected and belittled because of his belonging to the black race. His double consciousness represents a psychological burden for him. Not only does he have to discover himself through

Whites' eyes, but he also has to construct himself an authentic identity in order to refuse inferior identity markers that are imposed on him. William E. B. Dubois explains the psychological burden caused by *The Ex-Coloured Man's* double consciousness when he writes: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. One feels his two_ness an American, a Negro; two unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body." Dubois (1903, p. 3)

The negative representations of the black skin colour is perceptible through the Texan's attitude towards all the black characters. He hates Blacks because of the colour of their skin. He thinks that Blacks should be treated differently by just focusing on the negative representations of the black skin colour in his unconscious. As matter of fact, he avoids being in contact with Blacks in order not to meet people who symbolize "evil". Consequently, from the psychology of skin colour, Whites unconsciously inferiorize Blacks. They idealize their own skin colour by representing it with positive terms. On the contrary, they belittle Blacks by associating the black skin colour with negative terms. This attitude from Whites aims at making Blacks accept the superiority of the white race over the black race. The negative representations of the black skin colour also aims at making Blacks admit their inferiority. Therefore, Blacks suffer from this contrast between the social meaning of the black skin colour and that of the white skin colour. In whole, the psychology of skin colour in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* has been constructed from the complexes observable in each racial group. With their complex of superiority, white characters succeeded in symbolizing their skin colour with attributes of quality. They associated the colour of their skin with positive hallmarks that position themselves above Blacks in terms of quality. On the contrary, black characters are victims of this psychology because of their feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis white characters. This feeling of inferiority not only maintains them in a powerless position in society, but it also prevents the characters who have internalized racial considerations from claiming equality between the races. We discover through these psychological predispositions that the racial superiority that Whites pride themselves on is rooted in people's psyche.

Conclusion

At the end of our analysis, we can say that racial superiority is psychologically constructed in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. In this novel, Whites take advantage of the physical difference between them and Blacks to claim their superiority over the latter ones. They not only consider white skin colour as the unique criterion to assess a person's value, but they also focus on this arbitrary racial consideration to develop unfounded ideas to devalue everything associated with black skin colour. In so doing, they succeed in

expressing a complex of superiority that prevents Blacks from considering themselves equal to them. Such a situation reveals that Whites intentionally inferiorize Blacks in order to make them develop feelings of worthlessness that cause their complex of inferiority and facilitates their acceptance of the superiority of the white race over the black race. In this perspective, Whites psychologically construct their racial superiority to compel Blacks to unconsciously consider white supremacy in society as a natural fact that should not be rejected. Therefore, Whites' complex of superiority and Blacks' complex of inferiority results in a social psychology of skin colour that disadvantages colored people. From the consequences of the different complexes, it is clear that Whites are eager to profess their superiority over Blacks because they want to maintain and defend a system of wealth, power and privilege.

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