
Negotiating Biracial Identity as the Effect of Double Consciousness In Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*

Lia Indri Hapsari

Titien Diah Soelistyarini

English Department, Universitas Airlangga

Abstract

Throughout history, racism has severely affected the life of African-American. One of the psychological effects that they have to experience is double consciousness as depicted in Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. This novel portrays double consciousness experienced by the main character, Rachel Morse, a daughter of a white mother and an African-American father. Having born from mixed-race parents, Rachel has to face identity problem when living in her new society. This study aimed at examining Rachel's experience of having double consciousness using W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness. This study revealed that double consciousness has compelled Rachel to negotiate her biracial identity in American society who still believes in 'one-drop' rule in order to fit in the society. As Rachel must still have to face racism in America for being biracial, it showed that the existing practice of racism and stereotyping need to be eradicated to make a better living for African-American and biracial people in the United States.

Keywords: biracial identity, double consciousness, one-drop rule, racism, African American criticism

Introduction

The United States is a multiracial country in which so many races and ethnic groups live side by side with the white being the most dominant race as proven by US demography. According to the United States Demographics Profile 2014, 79.96% of the United States population was White-American. Meanwhile, other races, including African-American, Asian-American, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, and Hispanic, are regarded as minority groups. As one of the minorities, African-American comprises 12.85% of the total United States population (United States Demographics Profile 2014).

The first blacks came to America in the 1600s, which noted the beginning of slavery era, one of the darkest episodes in America history. In 17th century Colonial America, blacks were brought to America to be sold as slaves to work mostly on plantations. The voyage from Africa to America itself killed so many blacks due to terrible condition aboard the slave ships. Treatment toward them did not become any better upon their arrival in America. As slaves, they were separated from their family, worked from sunrise to sunset for six days a week, ate food not even suitable for animal, and lived in small and dirty shacks with no furniture (ushistory.org). Reading and writing were also forbidden for slaves as a way for their masters to control them (Patrick). Moreover, American law affirmed the status of black slaves more as property than as human being (Hallam). This racist treatment against these slaves brought nothing but sorrow and misery to them.

After nearly 200 years of suffering, President Lincoln finally declared black slaves as freedman. They could live freely with their family, find a job, travel anywhere, and learn how to read and write (Patrick). Nonetheless, even after the reconstruction era, blacks—later dubbed as African-American—still have to face the same problem, namely racism. Racism refers to unequal judgment within different racial groups depending on the sociopolitical domination of one race towards another (Tyson 360). Racism resulted from stereotyping practiced during slavery era. Historically, stereotype was constructed by the powerful and accepted as universal facts (Kowalski). The white believed in black inferiority as they were considered ignorant and barbaric, as well as unable to do anything better than the white.

Nevertheless, throughout the centuries after the abolition of slavery, Americans have witnessed black and white people live together peacefully that even enables interracial marriage between white and black. The mixing of races in American society may be assumed that race is no longer a problem. Nevertheless, in reality biracial and multiracial offspring born out of interracial marriage still have to face racism in their daily life. It might be due to the fact that the United States recognizes ‘one-drop’ rule. This rule classifies multiracial children or the offspring of black people as black without any possibility to be ‘in-between’ of black and white people (Dwoorkin & Lerum; Hickman; Ridgle). Jordan further asserts that ‘one-drop’ rule in the U.S.A. is part of social standard that occur in American social life in which a person with African ancestry would be regarded as black (99). Accordingly, this becomes another form of racism in post-slavery era as it aims to keep the purity of the white race (Floyd).

Interestingly, in 2010 President Obama stated himself as African-American rather than multiracial even though he had a white mother and a black father (Ridgle). This proves how ‘one-drop’ rule still exists even when the United States has just noted a new history for having its first African-American President. Hence, it further affirms that racism in the United States has not completely vanished; instead, it just changes its form to be more subtle and invisible (Tyson 367).

As one can only belong to one fixed category based on ‘one-drop’ rule, African-American and biracial people, in particular, have to experience double consciousness. According to Du Bois, African-Americans have two kinds of consciousness: being American, yet not totally American. Many of them could not decide to which they belong. They attempt to see themselves not only from their own perspective, but also from others (Du Bois 9). This experience cannot only be observed in real life, but also depicted in literary works. Narrating a story of an African-American girl named Rachel Morse, Durrow’s debut novel entitled *The Girl who Fell from the Sky* clearly portrays the double consciousness experienced by a biracial girl as a daughter of Danish mother and African-American father who has to move to Portland to live with her grandmother in a predominantly black environment. Having lived in Europe, in which racism is not known to exist, Rachel is not aware of how people can be classified differently based on their skin color. In Portland, she finally realizes that racial classification does exist. As racial conflicts arise as a result of her being biracial, it is interesting to examine the way Rachel negotiates her identity in the new environment as the effect of double consciousness.

Double consciousness may affect the identity of African-American as shown through Rachel who has to face difficulty in fitting herself in the American society who still believes in the ‘one-drop’ rule. According to Atchley, identity is characteristic of a person that could differentiate him/her from the other and also define him/her to specific group of people (qtd. in Kelly). In Rachel’s case, her surrounding society insists that she belongs to black due to her skin color. However, Rachel notices that she has some white characteristics uncommonly associated with African-American. Therefore, she does not feel that her identity cannot be classified as only one race.

There have been some previous studies focusing on biracial identity of African American portrayed in literary works. In her study, Isenberg examines a biracial girl in Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, using Stonequist’s approach. Her study shows that the expectation for biracial girl to bridge both races cannot be achieved because her surrounding society always compels her to identify herself with only one fixed race, white or black. Another study by Lubowicka tackles the issue of “hyphenated identities” in Durrow’s novel *The Girl who Fell from the Sky* using Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy’s approaches on identity. Lubowicka concludes that Rachel’s identity is a new identity that is different from both black and white. Rachel rather chooses to be nothing than to be white or black. These two previous studies are useful for exploring more about Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness in Rachel’s character in Durrow’s novel that have not been covered in Lubowicka’s.

This study is a qualitative research on a literary work aiming at finding and interpreting the meaning of the literary work. Accordingly, data analysis for this research adjusts interpretation with naturalistic approach. In other words, the data are analyzed in natural way to examine the meaning of the data and it would be used to answer the question the research (Denzin 3). Durrow’s novel was the primary source of this research that was analyzed with Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness under African-American

criticism. Secondary sources required to support this analysis included journal articles, books, and other publications, both printed and online. All of the sources were sorted and examined through close reading with the intention to find the meaning behind the layer (Boyles). Since Rachel is the main focus of this study, data from the novel were mainly taken from Rachel's chapters narrating the different atmosphere of her new environment, racist and discriminatory treatments against her, her double view and her way to negotiate them.

Rachel's Double Consciousness

Double consciousness is commonly experienced by African-American who must constantly strive for acceptance as member of the America society. As a brown-skinned, blue-eyed young girl who has spent her early age growing up in Europe, Rachel Morse suddenly starts to be aware of her race when she moved to live with her black grandmother in Portland. When living in Europe, she never realized such classification based on skin color, and how she comes to be classified as black by her surroundings. As she lives in predominantly African-American community in Portland, she begins to realize that there are white, African-American or black, and then her, who does not belong to either, as she claims, "*There are fifteen black people ... and seven white people. And there's me*" (9). In the novel, she is described as behaving like the white as she is always politely say, "*Thank you, ma'am, I say. I mind my manners around strangers*" (4), and also smart "*I am smart and I know that when she says "lizard" she means husband. That is called learning the meaning from the context*" (8). Smart is one of the stereotypes attached to white in American society (On Racism and White Privilege). The new understanding of her new society leads her to look at herself and make a new concept of who she is. "*I am light-skinned-ed ... and I talk white ... they say white people don't use washrags ... at grandma's, I do ... I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes*" (10). This understanding has resulted in a conflict regarding her new identity.

Rachel's unique characteristics put her in anxiety about her identity even though these characteristics do not confuse people around her who simply classify Rachel as African-American or black. They address her as black as in "*Black girl with a lot of hair don't need to be so tender-headed*" (6), or "*Such a pretty black girl...*" (13). Therefore, in order to fit in her society, Rachel learns to accept this new identity that people push on her. Du Bois examines this identity conflict and the experience of double consciousness among African-Americans. He believes that African-Americans who feel double consciousness will attempt to see not only from their perspective, but also others (Du Bois 9). This is clearly shown in Rachel's experience portrayed in the novel as she starts to fit herself to follow others' opinion.

According to Tyson, double consciousness occurs when someone feels trapped in two different cultures (362). Rachel also experiences being caught in two opposing cultures living in her new society in the United States. Growing up with her white Danish mother before she finally moved to live with her African-American grandmother, she understands well Danish words, culture and also food, as narrated: "*Hestehaler. That means horsetails*" (12). "*Is it like a confirmation? In Denmark everyone has a confirmation when they turn fourteen*" (56). Nevertheless, she could not find any Danish culture or also its food in Portland, "*They do not have franksbrod, or rugbrod, or wienerbrod, or any pastries with marzipan*" (15). This situation forces her to adjust to the condition of her new society.

In the United States, she cannot be someone she used to be. She needs to adapt to African-American culture and many new customs in their society. She learns about African things from her aunt Loretta: "*Aunt Loretta is teaching me about African things*" (78). Besides, Rachel also learns about African-American church, which is different from any white church she has attended: "*I started going to the AME Zion Church to make Grandma happy*" (99). She learns about the Gospel as she has never learned in Europe: "*Why didn't I know about the Gospel before?*" (99). She tries to make herself fit into the expectation of the American society toward her by attending a special African-American church such as AME Zion Church. By doing so, she attempts to make herself a part of the society by pretending to be real African-American just like the others.

However, no matter how hard she attempts to be accepted by her new society, she still keeps some of her old habits and manners, such as reading books and thinking in Danish: "*I've been reading big books*

since fourth grade” (32), and “...beneath my breath I sing the Danish words” (58). This shows how on and off she alters and adjusts her acts and behavior to satisfy the African-American society she lives in. According to Tyson, African-American needs to transform from African root culture to white cultural domination (362). Rather similar to this notion, Rachel is portrayed as conforming to the dominant culture even though in Durrow’s novel, this culture does not belong to the white, but the African- American. The African-American domination in the novel is described as the black domination toward biracial people, such as Rachel Morse who has no option to be her true self.

Rachel’s Identity Negotiation

Double consciousness as perceived by Rachel affects her identity in the society because it makes Rachel feels the uncertainty of her true identity. The novel clearly shows how Rachel’s identity has changed from time to time. In the beginning, when she has not learned the concept of race, she felt that she was the same as other Europeans. “*She is a black woman.... It is something I’m supposed to know but not think about*” (8-9). This quotation shows that in her mind, Rachel is not truly aware of how people can be distinguished based on their skin’s color. Her perspective changes after her moving to Portland: “*I see people two different ways now: people who look like me and people who don’t look like me*” (9).

Rachel makes an effort to know herself better after she lives in Portland: “*I am light-skinned-ed.... and I talk white... they say white people don’t use washrags.... at grandma’s, I do.... I learn that black people don’t have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes*” (10). She learns that she is different because she has a combination of both cultures that makes her adjust herself to the way other people see her even though it is not comfortable for her.

Rachel chooses black as her identity after she realizes her differences: “*I know that Jay doesn’t like me.... White people don’t think black people are pretty.*” (59). Here Rachel claim herself as black that she thinks as not attractive for a white person as his friend, Jay. Even though she knows that she is different from other African- Americans, she believes that by adopting African-American identity, she would be safe from her other African-American friends who do not like White people: “... *the way they say that – white girl – it feels like a dangerous thing to be*” (28). Apparently, her action results from her society belief in ‘one-drop’ rule that classifies even a biracial girl like her as black.

Rachel’s aunt, Loretta, also teaches her anything related to African: “*Aunt Loretta is teaching me about African things*” (78). As a result, Rachel starts to accept herself as black. She hopes that someday she will be a black woman who is just as pretty and smart as Aunt Loretta: “*Aunt Loretta is a black woman – the kind of woman I will be*” (98). Rachel puts her Aunt Loretta as her role model to motivate her to be a real African-American.

Rachel’s identity becomes more complicated. As hard as she tries to adopt her black identity, she still cannot perfectly imitate blacks in her acts, talks, or behavior without making great efforts. “*I can’t make those big sounds that Grandma can make, or the smooth high sounds the girl who looks like Tamika can make....*” (99), “*I am fourteen and know that I am black, but I can’t make the Gospel sound right from my mouth*” (120). She also cannot talk like African-American, such as her friend Lakeisha, “*Nice to meet y’all*” (113), “*I’m a braid your hair*” (116), or “*You ain’t got no tapes or nothing?*” (117). She talks way too proper as black people as Lakeisha once commented on her: “*No, thank you... Why you talk all proper?*” (118). Her lack of ability to naturally act, talk and behave as African-American is confusing for her.

Some of Rachel’s characteristics prove that she cannot be simply classified as black or African-American. She really likes reading : “*I’ve been reading big books since fourth grade*” (32), she is also smarter than any other black girl in her class, “... *and I know they’re not as smart as me*” (9), “*She a smart girl*” (16), “*I’m in the honor classes....*” (169). She cannot dance as black teenagers are commonly good at: “*Lakeisha stands in front of the bed and does the Pac-Man*” (116). She also prefers listening to jazz, which is regarded as white music, to listening to blues, which is more black music.. Accordingly, Rachel is in a complete opposite of black stereotypes and characteristics.

Rachel’s being different from other blacks as well as her being caught in two different culture results in her having conflicting views about her identity. Nevertheless, her anxiety over her identity does not

make her reject her black identity and choose a new one as biracial girl: "*I am fourteen and know that I am black, but I can't make the Gospel sound right from my mouth*" (120). She still pushes herself to believe that she is black: "*I'm black. I'm black, I know.*" (148).

Nevertheless, Rachel's effort to make herself a 'real' African-American does not affect the way her society perceives her. Her friends even accuse her of wanting to be white and call her Oreo: "... *how the others black girls in school think I want to be white. They call me an Oreo. I don't want to be white.*" (148). As a result, Rachel tries even harder to negotiate her identity by making an effort to enjoy her new life in American society as a 'real' African-American. She attempts to remove her white identity and adopt some manner that will make her accepted as a true black: "*My new ways are black talk*" (149), and "*My new ways are wearing shirts too tight. My new ways are paying too much attention to boys*" (150). She compels herself to be more African-American than biracial.

Rachel's 'black revolution' becomes wilder since her fight with Tamika, "... *and says, 'FUCK OFF,' and punches Tamika so hard that she stumbles back. So hard that her nose bleeds*" (170). She makes her skin tanner than before: "*There's nothing wrong with being dark-skinned ... I like to tan*" (170). This revolution has changed her into a rebellious girl. She argues with her grandmother, "*I tell her that she is perpetuating racist ideas from slavery*" (170). She also acts like other black girls who try to keep boys around them, "*I let Anthony Miller take off my shirt so he can see what he's touching*" (171). Even so, her revolution does not affect her as a smart girl, "*I am still a model student. I have straight As. I can still be something to be proud of: class vice president, National Honor Society Head, coeditor of the school's creative writing journal. I am a good student if not a good girl*" (173). Her intelligence is the last thing that she still keeps after she determines to be a 'real' African-American.

Her perspective of 'better be black than biracial' changes after she meets new friends, Jesse and Brick, that make her learn that it is good to be different and it is not important whether you are black or white. "*I forget that what you are – being black or white – matters.*" (202). A white boy named Jesse shows her how white people can be different from the stereotypes she knows: "*Jesse isn't like a white guy. He calls white people pilgrims. He speaks a broken Mayan Spanish. He recites revolutionary Jamaican poems by heart.*" (188), "... *he knows things about black that only black people know....*" (189), and "*Jesse makes me see there's a different way to be white*" (202). A new perspective of color for Rachel does not only affect her perspective toward white, but also African-American.

Brick, a black guy she knows at her work also gives impact to her perspective about black. He is a pianist in the Salvation Army Harbor Lights Center. Rachel tries to hide the truth that she has relation with white to Brick, "*When they want to know where you got those beautiful eyes.... From my Aunt*" (190). The effort she makes to cover up her true identity as biracial girl does not work when she has to face African-American habit she does not understand. As African-American, Brick knows about African-American habit which is different from that of White American. "*The piano player puts out his fist for me to touch. I am embarrassed because I don't know what to do. Do I knock his fist with my own? Hold out my hand, palm flat?*" (191). Fortunately Brick breaks the awkward moment between them by changing his greeting style from African-American to White American style, "*He takes my hand gently in his own and kisses it*" (191). Brick brings Rachel to realize that African-American can understand white culture, which usually is avoided by African-American. "*And Brick makes me see there's a different way to be black*" (202).

Rachel also meets with Jesse's mother, a white Norwegian woman who moved to the United States since her childhood. She is always obsessed to learn more about her Norwegian root, yet she only feels American at heart, as she claims, "*I'm more American than Norwegian. Sometimes it feels like being Norwegian was just a part of my childhood....*" (205). It is quite different from Rachel's experience who feels not fully American. As a white person, Jesse's mother has not face any difficulty to adjust with the white-dominated society. She is accepted well in to American environment. Jesse's mother also has part to change Rachel's perspective of being African-American.

Rachel's friendship with Jesse and Brick makes her more comfortable with her own identity. She does not see someone only as white or black. Rachel begins to see the possibility of another identity as biracial, "*Brick is light-skinned with golden colors in his brown eyes. He could be black or Mexican or mixed like*

me” (202). Moreover, she also begins to call herself as mixed, “... or mixed like me” (202). This new way of viewing her identity greatly affects her life. She feels more comfortable about herself as a biracial person. She decides to keep her Danishness as part of the identity that she does not want to leave behind. Nevertheless, this way does not affect people around her who still think her as African- American or black.

Conclusion

Racism and stereotype in American society have only brought nothing but sorrow and misery to African-American and biracial that push them to fight for equality. The reduction of racism and stereotype practice toward these minorities may create a better life for them. Moreover, racism and stereotype are the main reason for African-American and biracial in the United States to live through double consciousness. Experiencing double consciousness may lead African-American and biracial to feel anxious about their identity. The anxiety in turn affects their true identity and pushes them to negotiate with the opinion of the dominant society. As ‘one-drop’ rule exists in the United States, it becomes a new form of racism and stereotype against African-American and biracial. It has a huge contribution to African-American and biracial in choose the identity to adopt. Nonetheless, the negotiation they make to fit in the American society cannot change the opinion of the society about them. This study concludes that one’s identity should not be based on people’s opinion toward him/her. Instead, it should be based on how he or she feels about his or herself as the underlying factor affecting his or her decision to choose which identity he or she belongs to. Hence, comfort is the one key that may lead someone to his or her true identity, not other’s opinion.

Works Cited

- Boyles, Nancy. "Closing in on Close Reading." *Common Core: Now What?* Vol. 70, 2013: 36-41.
- Denzin, Norman K. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Ed. Yvonna S. Lincoln. 3rd. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed. Jim Manis. Hazleton: Pennsylvania State University, 2006.
- Durrow, Heidi W. "About Heidi." *Heidi W. Durrow*. 4 June 2014 <<http://heidiwdurrow.com/bio/>>. —. *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010.
- Dworkin, Shari and Kari Lerum. *Race, Sexuality, and The "One Drop Rule": More Thoughts about Interracial Couples and Marriage*. 18 October 2009. 1 November 2014 <<http://thesocietypages.org/sexuality/2009/10/18/race-sexuality-and-the-one-drop-rule-more-thoughts-about-interracial-couples-and-marriage/>>.
- Floyd, Jami. *WNYC*. 10 February 2011. 7 November 2014 <<http://www.wnyc.org/story/114026-why-one-drop-matters/>>.
- Hallam, Jennifer. *Slavery and the Making of America*. 2 November 2014 <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/gender/history.html>>.
- Hickman, Christine B. "The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census." *Michigan Law Review* (1997): 1161-1265.
- Isenberg, Emily. "Toni Morrison and the Evolution of American Biracial." *ECLS Student Scholarship*, 2009.
- Jordan, Winthrop D. "Historical Origins of the One-Drop Rule in the United States." *Critical Mixed Race Studies*, 2014: 98-132.
- Kelly, Lynda. "What is identity?" 19 May 2010. *Australian Museum*. 14 October 2014 <<http://australianmuseum.net.au/blogpost/Museullaneous/What-is-identity>>.
- Kowalski, Jennifer. "Stereotypes of History: Reconstructing Truth and the Black Mammy." 2009. *University at Albany*. 2 November 2014 <<http://www.albany.edu/womensstudies/journal/2009/kowalski/kowalski.html>>.
- Lubowicka, Agata. "Challenging Notions of Culture, Race And Identity." *I Want to be Nothing*, 2011: 75-83.
- "On Racism and White Privilege." 2000. *Teaching Tolerance*. 31 December 2014 <<http://www.tolerance.org/article/racism-and-white-privilege>>.
- Patrick, Diane. *The New York Public Library Amazing African American History : a book answer for kids*. New York: A Stonesong Press Book, 1998.
- Ridgle, Nia. "Identity Crisis: Multiracial Identity and the Future of America." *McNair Scholars Journal* (n.d.): 192-207.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd. New York: Routledge, 2006.

"United States Demographics Profile 2014." 23 August 2014. *IndexMundi*. 14 October 2014
<http://www.indexmundi.com/united_states/demographics_profile.html>.
ushistory.org. *Slave Life and Slave Codes*. 2 November 2014
<<http://www.ushistory.org/us/27b.asp>>.