



Quest for Identity in James McBride's "*The Color of Water*"

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Abstract:

The search for identity is a constant theme in American society. This paper is titled Quest of Identity in James McBride's "*The Color of Water*" analyse James McBride's confusion about issues of race and self-Identity whereas The South American, especially in from the 1930s to the 1960s, is a hard place to live for when you are a "colored person" and the paper discussed glimpse of racism in American society. This paper analyses correlations between mobility, and identity construction in James McBride's *The Color of Water*. This paper is analyses racism in James McBride's *The Color of Water*. Racism in the United States has existed since the colonial period, when white Americans were given legitimately or socially endorsed benefits and rights while these equivalent rights were denied to different races and minorities.

Key Words:

African American Identity crisis, Racism, American Society

Introduction:

James McBride was born in 1957 in Brooklyn, New York, a biracial journalist, jazz saxophonist, and composer to a Black minister Andrew McBride and a white Jewish mother Ruth McBride-Jordan. He is well known for his 1995 memoir, the bestselling book *The Color of Water*, which describes his life growing up in a large, poor American-African family that was led by his white Jewish mother. He expresses his curiosity as well as his confusion about issues of race and self-identity when he says:

Mommy was by her own definition 'light-skinned,' a statement which I had initially accepted as fact but at some point later decided was not true. My best friend Billy Smith's mother was as light as Mommy was and had red hair to boot, but there was no question in my mind that Billy's mother was black and my mother was not. There was something inside me, an ache I had, like a constant itch that got bigger and bigger as I grew... (McBride 22).

The object of McBride's constant embarrassment, and his continuous fear for her safety, his mother was an inspiring figure, who through sheer force of will saw her dozen children through college, and many through

graduate school. The South American, especially in from the 1930s to the 1960s, is a hard place to live for when you are a “colored person” or a different race. **Racism in American Society:**

It is now generally acknowledged that the term ‘race’ entered English early in the 16th century. This was also the time when the term was acquiring currency in other European languages, for example ‘rassa’ and ‘race’ in French, ‘razza’ in Italian, ‘raca’ in Portuguese, and ‘raza’ in Spanish. (Rattansi 23)

The term ‘racism’ was coined in the 1930s, primarily as a response to the Nazi project of making Germany judenrein, or ‘clean of Jews’. (Rattansi 4). Racism in the United States has existed since the colonial period, when white Americans were given legitimately or socially endorsed benefits and rights while these equivalent rights were denied to different races and minorities. European Americans—especially well-to-do white Anglo-Saxon Protestants enjoyed in elite benefits in issues of education, immigration, voting rights, citizenship, land acquisition, and criminal procedure all through American history. Non-Protestant immigrants from Europe, especially the Irish, Poles, and Italians, frequently endured xenophobic prohibition and different types of ethnicity-based separation in American culture until the late nineteenth and mid twentieth hundreds of years. In addition, groups like Jews and Arabs have faced continuous separation in the United States, and accordingly, some people who have a place with these gatherings are not distinguished as white. African Americans confronted limitations on their political, social, and economical opportunity all through a lot of US history. East, South, and Southeast Asians have faced racism in America.

Racism crises in *The Color of Water*:

The American South, especially in from the 1930s to the 1960s, is a hard place to live for when you are a “colored person”. James McBride, discovers the complexities of having a bi-racial activity, especially at a time when blacks and other minorities are hated and discriminated upon by the dominant white society. *The Color of Water* attempts to reflect at the domination of American society by the white man, and attempts to discover his own identity by looking at his mother’s past: the life of Ruth McBride, a Polish-Jewish immigrant in the South of the 1930s, beset by constant intimidation and violence of the white majority to other racial minorities, especially to Jewish immigrants and to the blacks, who were historically imported by white plantation owners to work as slaves in cotton plantations.

In Chapter 10, titled as SCHOOL, James reflects upon his, and his siblings, early conceptions about Judaism. They were not familiar with this element of their mother's background, and they had only vague impressions, and often misconceptions, of Judaism. However, James comments that at times his mother's attitudes consciously or unconsciously reflected her upbringing. For example, her absolute insistence on the importance of education meant that James and his siblings often commuted long hours in order to receive the best possible schooling, mostly in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods. As a consequence, James and his siblings were often the sole black students in school, and suffered from the prejudice of the white world. James McBride notes:

I was the only black kid in my fifth-grade class at P.S. 138 in the then all-white enclave of Rosedale, Queens, and one afternoon as the teacher dutifully read aloud from our history book’s one page on

“Negro history”, someone in the back of the class whispered, “James is a nigger!” followed by a ripple of tittering and giggling across the room. The teacher shushed him and glared, but the damage had been done. I felt the blood rush to my shank low in my chair.... (McBride 89).

In chapters, especially *School, Boys and Daddy* explores the personal experiences of both James and Ruth on racial prejudice, with Ruth having to secretly meet with her loved one due to the threat of the Ku Klux Klan, and the fears of James in attending a predominantly white school.

Ruth is drawn to African Americans in New York as well because of their warmth and generosity, in contrast to her loveless Jewish home. Andrew Dennis McBride, the man she marries, is a black Baptist preacher. Even in New York, they are afraid because of their interracial marriage, which was shocking to people in the 1940s. Ruth has to leave the white world behind and become black, because African Americans are more willing to accept her. She likes that they don't judge her. James says of his mother that she is “a black woman in white skin” (McBride 260). With her twelve black children, she creates a self-sufficient world with them while they are young. They are taught to shun outsiders and play with each other. Whenever she goes out with them, she ignores the stares and insults, but the young James is sensitive and becomes ashamed of having a white mother until he learns her story as an adult.

Search for Identity:

The search for identity is a constant theme in American society. Although society itself favors conformity, the American Dream is about the freedom to achieve individuality. Ruth Shilsky, like other immigrants, wants to be American and needs to be herself instead of repeating her parents' lives. Ruth comes from an Orthodox Jewish tradition that doesn't leave anything except obedience to its ancient prescriptions that appear irrelevant to her in twentieth-century America. Even after fifty years of being cast out of that tradition by her family because she violated its rules, Ruth is in a position to inform her son intimately what the customs were, the way to eat kosher and the way Jews worship and mourn their dead. It had been a past that she was always running from and trying to suppress.

“So you're my real mother?” (McBride 24). James even asked her mother if he was adopted, due to the fact that he has a different colour with her mother. The civil rights movement at that time was strong, with the black community in their area actively supporting and campaigning for more black powers in society, to which her mother is very reluctant to accept. Adding to such complexities is a commentary of James upon her mother's belief, often contradictory because of her Orthodox origins, as well as she being a Christian convert living among a black community. After this recall, however, James decides to show sympathy to his mother, ending up punching the face of a son of a member of the militant Black Panther Party, whom he deemed as a threat to his white mother. After all, this episode shows that joining a black power solidarity movement, especially for a multiracial is not always smooth; convictions for black power may conflict with personal beliefs and priorities, provoking hesitation despite common discriminatory experiences in a white-dominated society.

James represents a later generation's struggle with racism: "The question of race was like the power of the moon in my house" (McBride 94). James is the young black teen during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. His older siblings are enthralled with the idea of Black Power, but James is torn because he fears for his mother's life. Only the fact that she is a fearless immigrant Jew and eccentric saves her in the New York housing projects. Little James is torn in his soul because of his mixed heritage, not knowing who he is or where he belongs. Can he hate whites when his mother is one? He is uncomfortable being the "token black" within the white schools his mother sends him to.

Conclusion:

"God is the color of water," so says Ruth, and "Water doesn't have a color." (McBride 51). The central point here is not that water doesn't have a colour, yet rather that water doesn't have just one fixed colour. The colour of water is chosen by its environment. The colour of a lake is in many cases green in light of the fact that the trees, the grass, and bushes around are all green. The lake sincerely mirrors the marvel adjacent to it. The brilliant lake sparkles splendidly in light of the brilliant sunbeam. The ocean is blue in view of its impression of the brilliant purplish blue sky above it. At the point when the sky is secured with black clouds, the ocean becomes dark grey accordingly.

Thus, entitling his memoirs *The Color of Water*, James McBride means to give the possibility that man's character is the colour of water: it changes as indicated by the circumstances wherein the character is arranged. The situating of character reflects and is chosen by the situationally of which the subject is conscious. An individual moves his/her personality as indicated by the verifiable contexts, developments, aggregations, and hasten residue. In all, Character identity is not returning to roots but a coming-to-terms-with "routes." Identities are made up out of partial fragments and such fragmentations are historically constituted. Identities are at all times contradictory and situational. Changing names according to residential places merely reflects the correlations between versatility, renaming, and identity construction.

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