

Resisting Yet Restricted: Racism and Ethnocentrism in Paul Beatty's Slumberland

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Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of racism and ethnocentrism in Paul Beatty's novel *Slumberland*. In this post-racial world, African Americans face various types of prejudice that can harm their existence. After facing the cruelty of the slave trade, the Black community focus on survival through their skills. However, whites take power on their hands and begin to devalue the African Americans intelligence in the eyes of ethnocentrism and racism, which strongly creates a mental shock. While ethnocentrism represents the belief that one race or culture is superior to others, racism is a colour-based form of discrimination that treats people unequally. Beatty's novel illustrates how these ideas continue to affect the lives of Black people even today. The characters face racial prejudice in different sectors, yet they resist oppression from the superior force. The research presents marginalised people's tension between the white-dominated culture and the limitations imposed by systemic bias. It applies Frantz Fanon's insights that claim racism operates both as an external structure of domination and an internalised condition that produces psychological trauma and identity crisis. By focusing on the experiences of subordinated people, the research deliberately highlight the pain caused by white stereotypes and social injustice.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, Racism, Oppression, Inequality, Stereotypes

Introduction:

In this modern world, the intersection of racism and ethnocentrism continues to oppress the marginalised communities globally. Following the end of the slave trade, African Americans began to educate themselves in all industries. They grasp American norms and begin to assume that becoming educated, earning property, or developing talents will earn them respect from the dominant side. So the Black Americans work hard on improving their economic, social, and political standing and begin to flourish in various fields. However, whites are unable to cope with Black people's success and begin to follow various invisible prejudices such as systemic exclusion, ethnocentrism, preconceptions, physical harm, and legal disturbances. Even after colonialism, the white-dominant group harbours cultural and physical intolerances, believing that their traditions and values are standard and better. Meanwhile, Black people must navigate a world that compels them to protect human equality. They are treated unfairly, and the basic needs are often ignored. African American children initially remain unaware of their ancestors' struggles, but later generations begin to question the white political control after repeatedly witnessing racial injustice.

Paul Beatty's novel *Slumberland*, explore these pressures by depicting how white forces maintain cultural and physical biases against the people of colour. Through his characters, Beatty highlights the anguish caused by institutionalised subjugation that continues to struggle the African Americans for building selfhood in the white-dominated spaces. His works expose the ongoing anxiety between resistance and restriction in modern racial and cultural politics. While previous studies focus on Beatty's humour, postmodern style, or treatment of identity and music, less attention is paid to how his novels link racism with ethnocentrism. This paper fills that gap by examining the intersection of these forces and how they influence the experiences of Black characters. This study applies Frantz Fanon's theory from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986) to show how feelings of inferiority, the white gaze, and cultural dominance affect the mental and social experiences of Black people in



schools, workplaces, and daily life. Fanon's theory is applied in Beatty's novels to show that systemic racism and ethnocentrism tends to shape the external conditions and internal experiences of Black characters. His ideas intentionally explain that prejudice can develop the feelings of inferiority, split identity, and psychological alienation. In Beatty's novel, this framework highlights how characters navigate social oppression while negotiating their sense of self and resisting cultural dominance.

The Concept of Ethnocentrism and Racism

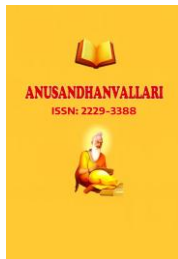
Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's culture, tradition, ethnicity or birth is superior and other groups' are inferior. It makes the customs and practices of the dominant group appear as if they are the "standard" for everyone else. According to Bizumic, Monaghan, and Priest (2021), ethnocentrism is a concept that reinforces the social hierarchies because it gives power to the dominant culture. Küey states that "as a social determinant of health, racial discrimination and ethnocentrism, a powerful force that weakens human relations, continue to afflict the health and mental health conditions of people" (Küey, 2022, p. 1). In this way, ethnocentrism silences the voices of marginalised groups and makes them feel excluded from the larger society. Racism, as a deep-rooted injustice, reduces people to unequal positions based on their skin colour or physical features. Gonzalez and Brown (2022) explain that this attitude is not only a historical problem but continues to operate across borders. The racial strategy lowers the skills of the African Americans and excludes them in advanced schools, governments, and social policies. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986) describes how racism traps both the oppressed and the oppressor in harmful roles, making Black people feel inferior while feeding white superiority. Racism and ethnocentrism, though they differ in meaning, often overlap in the lives of the marginalised people. Both ideologies are the intertwined forms of oppression that are evident in the supremacy exercised by the leading people over the subordinate groups. Hall (1997) argues that stereotypes fix people into one negative image, ignoring their individuality and complexity. The combination of racism and ethnocentrism produces long-term feelings of alienation for oppressed community across the world. These ideas show that cultural chauvinism is not only a physical trouble but also mental and emotional way to suppress the peripheral voices. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* explains, "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behaves in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (Fanon, 1986, p. xxvii), to show how oppression is both external and internal and shapes people to see themselves through others.

Paul Beatty's Slumberland

Paul Beatty's novel offer powerful examples of the concepts of racism and ethnocentrism to show how they work together to degrade African Americans. In *Slumberland* (2008), Ferguson, a Black musician in Berlin, faces cultural prejudice and everyday racism even outside America. This novel's characters are extremely talented and open-minded. Despite being exposed to cultural supremacy and racial discrimination, they resist it non-violently. The protagonists never become emotionally weak; instead they attempt to seek a solution that eliminates the continued bias. Beatty's shows the characters' strive to develop self identity but the trap of stereotypes and prejudice mercilessly ruins their efforts. The novel deals how racism and ethnocentrism may devalue humanity and the peaceful interaction between Whites and Black people.

Institutional and Everyday Racism: Stereotypes and Ethnocentrism in Slumberland

White authorities often deny the African American children an equal chance due to the cultural bias. In *Slumberland*, the protagonist, Ferguson, is a highly proficient student who resides in America in his childhood days. Ferguson's mathematics skill leads him to take a special exam to enrol in aeronautical science, where he scores centum. His mother can predict the dominant system that will refuse to recognise her son's exceptional talents. After the result, the white teacher announces, ". . . finding suitable candidates for training in the aeronautical and nuclear sciences" (Beatty, 2008, p. 21). The word 'suitable' reveals the biased selection enforced by the white authority that allows only white students to receive advanced opportunities. But the

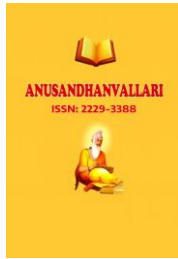


blameless African American students are restricted from getting into better professional courses. Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes: “The educated black man, slave of the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro, feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him. Or that he no longer understands his race.” (Fanon, 1986, p. 17). This sense of alienation that Fanon describes is echoed in Ferguson’s experience in *Slumberland*. Ferguson emotionally says, “The white students were placed in advanced mathematics class at the university; we Negro boys, and the lone girl, were given instruments. . .” (Beatty, 2008, p. 21). Through this incident, Paul Beatty exposes how institutional racism sustains ethnocentric hierarchies by excluding Black students from advanced opportunities. Gillborn (2008) shows that even education systems that claim to be equal often reproduce racial inequality. Such exclusion causes loss of identity, lack of recognition, and limited opportunities often compel marginalised children to seek meaningful lives elsewhere. Seeking freedom from the contemporary stereotypes, Ferguson moves from America to Berlin, yet racism persists across the borders of the world.

In Berlin, Ferguson encounters everyday racism at a tanning salon, where a white-woman staff practises ethnocentric and racial prejudice against the Black customer cruelly, even as a regular client. Ferguson narrates the white woman’s gaze as, “A look bemused familiarity creeps across her face. A look that says, *Maybe I’ve seen you somewhere before. Didn’t you rape me last Tuesday? Aren’t you my son’s tap dance teacher?*” (Beatty, 2008, p. 4). As Ferguson experiences the prejudiced gaze of the salon staff, he is subjected to the subtle violence of everyday racism. Fanon explains, “The White man’s eyes break up the Black man’s body, and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed” (Fanon, 1986, p. xxv). In the salon, Ferguson is seen through White’s stereotypical vision that labels him as dangerous and overly sexual. This shows how the white gaze gives bodily racist meanings that create psychological impact on the marginalised people. Everyday racism quietly reinforces these hierarchies, making discrimination seem normal. Beatty highlights how such encounters not only dehumanise the victim but also distort the observer’s perception.

In Berlin, Ferguson meets two African-featured, fair-skinned friends named Klaudia and Fatima. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Fatima becomes deeply sad, and she develops fear of life and survival. When Ferguson, Klaudia, and Fatima, attempt to enter a club, they are denied due to the new policy that allows only women, excluding Black patrons. The power-gained authorities create unfair laws and rules to keep the Black citizens in lower level to prove the white superiority. The experience of each character in Beatty’s novel demonstrates how the systemic racism functions both in the institutional and personal levels. As Fanon notes, the Black man, “Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, becomes an oracle” (Fanon, 1986, p. 13). Ferguson’s confrontation at the club serves as a concrete example of Fanon’s theory. It exposes how the systemic barriers imposed by white-dominated belief systems reveal the pervasive effects of racial prejudice.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Fatima becomes deeply saddened and develops horror about life and survival. Fatima’s life in Berlin reflects the severe psychological effects of racial prejudice and ethnocentrism. The narrator observes about Fatima’s mental health, “She stopped answering any mail that arrived in white envelopes, refused to drink milk or eat mashed potatoes. Polar bears, snowstorms, and Danes had to be avoided at all costs because they were bad omens. And, in blessed irony, toilet paper scared her shitless” (Beatty, 2015, pp. 185–186). Harris-Perry (2011) adds that such images particularly harm Black women by creating controlling stereotypes that affect their social and psychological lives. Fatima’s life illustrates the ethnocentric bias that can even cause severe mental traumas that affect the everyday routines, leading her to commit suicide. The narrator, on seeing her dead body, notes, “I suppose ultimately that was what Fatima wanted, to be skinless and hairless. Featureless really” (Beatty, 2015, p. 185). Fatima wants to get rid of her physical traits, her curly hair and African skin that reveal the victim’s extreme psychological burden of living under cruel racial judgement. Her



fear of white objects reflects this negative internalisation. Beatty demonstrates that ethnocentrism is not only a social or institutional problem but also a deeply personal and cruel force that can shape thoughts, fears, and life itself.

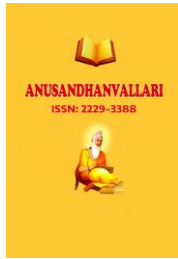
The deliberate use of racial stereotypes among the white communities is evident in everyday interactions. After relocating to Berlin, the narrator gains recognition for building the Berlin Wall through his music. As a gifted musician with a phonographic memory, he continues to face racial bias. At an event for exceptionally talented individuals, a woman traces his ancestry and immediately identifies him as being from Los Angeles. She then remarks, "Now if you show me your penis, I can tell by the size, girth, and curvature what African tribe your male ancestors hail from" (Beatty, 2008, p. 241). Even in spaces that assure to celebrate people's talent equally, Ferguson is still reduced to endure racial stereotypes that undermine his achievements and pride. His talent is overlooked by the white woman, who instead adopts an ethnocentric viewpoint that degrades the protagonist. She wants to exclude Ferguson racially, without considering the verbal pain he can endure with. Despite encountering numerous challenges and success, the protagonist is denied to enjoy full recognition due to his black body. Though he relocates from America to Berlin, Ferguson is unable to escape or abolish the oppressing attitudes of the dominant group. Though the protagonist uses his musical talent to achieve a goal, like symbolically bringing back the Berlin Wall. However, the dominant people judge him by his physical appearance instead of his skills that reveals how the society's bias can reduce the value of knowledge and make people feel marginalised. Fanon writes, "After an unexpected and salutary internal revolution, he now paid tribute to his own revolting ugliness" (Fanon, 1986, p. 154). This shows how oppressed people can recognise and accept themselves; despite these barriers, both narrators resist racial and cultural oppression. Their actions show that personal determination can fight injustice, even though social and cultural systems still limit them. White dominant groups often see people of colour as "outsiders" and attach labels such as "tribal" or other derogatory terms that reduce their humanity to stereotypes. It is not limited to one country or culture because oppression crosses borders to dominate subordinated people. Thus, African Americans develop an inferiority complex and start to live with a split identity, which is defined by the principles of the oppressors. The leading white force harbours inequality by portraying non-Western identities as exotic, primitive, or inferior and takes verbal and physical violence as tools to silence marginalised voices. Beatty's *Slumberland* vividly depicts these psychological effects through the characters' experiences and highlights that racism and ethnocentrism is transnational in nature.

Conclusion

Thus Beatty's novels *Slumberland* demonstrates that even bold acts of resistance are often controlled by societal biases and systemic barriers. It reveals the tension between individual agency and structural oppression where confrontation alone helps the marginalised people to overcome deep-rooted prejudice. Through Fanon's lens, the research shows how internalised inferiority, the white gaze, and cultural dominance intensify the psychological and social burden on Black characters, showing that oppression operates both externally and within the self. Beatty uncovers the biases against people of colour that persist, even though slavery, racism, discrimination, and segregation are officially abolished. Through a number of illustrative examples, the study examines that systemic racism and ethnocentrism remain transnational and enduring, affecting everyday life, institutions, and interpersonal relationships, thereby limiting opportunities and shaping identity of marginalised groups. Beatty's critique, with the application of Fanon's theory, underscores the necessity of understanding both the structural and psychological dimensions of racial inequality in modern society.

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