

*A Study of Religion and History in African American Fiction
promoting Plurality and Stability among Black Community*

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*Dr. Abrar Ahmed

**Dr. Athar Farooq,

Abstract

Religion has always provided direction, solace, and tranquilly. Additionally, it can foster a sense of belonging and connection among different types of individuals living all over the world. The influence of religion on social norms and expectations is a perennially important and challenging area for investigation. It is connected to history, which serves as the community's constant source of inspiration and stability. While history has been interpreted as a source of support, motivation, and stability in the context of physical and mental strength whereas, religion has been a source of fostering diversity among the people by engaging their spiritual side. As a result, both are interconnected and interdependent and can provide spiritual, physical, and motivational support for community in its development and advancement. This paper focuses on how African American authoress Jacqueline Woodson used religion and history in her novel *The Brown Girls Dreaming* to assist readers in developing a feeling of community, equality, and diversity that gave them the fortitude to tackle life's problems. Postmodernism is used as the theoretical framework for this study's qualitative design and analysis of the selected novel. In order to educate and empower kids against the false narratives promoted by white people to divide them and foster cultural particularism in order to isolate them in society. Jacqueline's mother and grandmother tell the tales of their historical heroes and liberation warriors. In order to foster a sense of unity and sustainability within their society, they also use religion as a source of peace and diversity. she also cites the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the teachings of the Qur'an as sources of honesty and stability in addition to the teachings of Christianity and the Bible. The study sums up that the authoress aptly uses religion and history to promotes sense of plurality and stability among the community and teaching of religion and history provide sufficient source of inspiration and motivation for her depressed community.

Key Words: Plurality. Development, Comfort. Peace, harmony. Motivation. Freedom Fighters. Belonging. Integrity and Stability.

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*Hazara University Mansehra. Corresponding Email: barz86@yahoo.com

**Hazara University Mansehra.

1. Introduction

African Americans have been disadvantaged for many reasons in the society. An idea of cultural particularism and sense of timidity and lethargy were deliberately associated with them to keep them out of the battle. Media, politics, and many corrupt practices of religion were involved in this kind of a dirty politics. Their stories and history were distorted to discourage them and set them at the corner. They were isolated by promoting the idea of cultural particularism that was not an encouraging phenomenon in the fast-moving world of pluralism and diversities. Their negative image has been promoted through mainstream media, law and various negative connotations were associated with them. They have been facing rejection because of the “monopoly of power and wealth by a small minority of those who unquestionably influence policies and practice of social institutions as well as laws that are enacted in American society” (Jewell, 2003, p. 2). Their contribution and hard work have never been recognized because of cultural particularism and their demand for equal rights.

African Americans were aware of the fact that “despite their best efforts, hard work has not always led to the fulfillment of their goals” (Willie & Reddick, 2010, p. 35), but they start moving towards the mainstream, continued revolution, and kept fighting for equality during segregation because “in memory, they [African Americans] are equal to whites” (Hattery & Smith, 2012, p. 12). African American writers, political activist and social reformists have many challenges in order to support their community against this kind of negative agenda promoted by white people. They must deconstruct history and reconstruct a positive image of the community to make it easy to face the challenges of life and promote good values among the community. They tried many things to mould the set precedent of the society on one hand and on the other hand they executed many positive practices to change this scenario. No doubt, they have a strong history of struggle and freedom that was a source of inspiration and motivation for them. They had been the true believers and practitioners of religion in past that were also sources of guidance, comfort and creation of a sense of belonging

among them. Many African American writers use religion and history to give them strong roots for stability and wings to fly high to show themselves a strong nation. They show them the way of plurality by leaving cultural pluralism aside and support them through the guidance of religion that enf all sources of differences and bring in the mainstream as true believers by accepting their diversities. This paper analyzes *Brown Girls Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson to explore all these themes in the backdrop of postmodernism. The theory works to end all sort of oppression against one group of the society and promotes the idea of plurality, totality, centralism. Mennens (2011) a postmodern theorist, also underlines the relevance of multicultural identity in allowing minorities to progress in new ways.

Jacqueline Woodson discusses in her novel that mono-culturalism has no place in American society. She promotes the diversity of civilizations in her story in a very beautiful way. She stresses the recognition of her community as new emerging force around the global. She promoted the idea of pluralism and instilled in them a spirit of resistance and stability to face various biases they encounter and helped prepare the community to tackle their social issues. She uses religion and history of their freedom fighters to concentrate on their values and positivity and makes them understand to overlook the distinctions among themselves and other social groupings. All these themes are the essential ingredients of this paper and analysed through the framework provided by postmodernism.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In subtly growing modern racial society, minority groups are vulnerable to various kind of subsidiary agendas. In this precarious situation they must carve new way of progress and advancement that could help them cope with existing racial hierarchies and guide them towards destination of recognition and acceptances. To locate this issue, this paper investigates motivational and comforting role of religion and history that promotes the idea of plurality and stability among the community in Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girls Dreaming* pertaining to the postmodernism as a theoretical

framework. The paper also traces the influence of religion and history on black people that integrate and motivate them to fight against existing racial hierarchies.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To examine the role of religion and history in promoting the idea of plurality and stability in *Brown Girls Dreaming*.
- ii. To trace the impact of religion and history on black community that motivates and integrates them against racial hierarchies as portrayed in *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. How do Jacqueline Woodson use religion and history in *Brown Girls Dreaming* to promote the idea of plurality and stability in her community?
- ii. What impact do religion and history cast on black people to motivate and integrate them against racial hierarchies as portrayed in *Brown Girls Dreaming*?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The current research paper is worth reading to understand the importance of plurality and multiplicity in the fast-moving society. It throws light on the harm of monoculturalism that is always been used as subsidiary policies by the dominance group of the society against the less powerful group. It highlights the need of pluralism as new source of progress and helps in reframing the identity and future by exploring motivational and integrating role of religion and history as portrayed in the selected novel. History is an important source of pride and motivation for a community, the paper presents a brief account of the freedom fighters of African American community and show it as source pride and motivation for the members of the black community. This research paper allows readers to evaluate their past, forecast their future, and create it by identifying new forms of revolution, self-esteem, pluralism and multiplicity as new sources of success and progress for African American community. Similarly, in Pakistan, religion is considered a source of spirituality, this paper helps the society to view the religion as a new dimension for integration, plurality and stability.

2. Literature review

The impact of race on African American community cannot be avoided. To explore the coping strategies against racial hierarches and provide them spiritual, moral and motivational support, the modification must be brought in their cultural particularism and mono-culturalism. They must ensure a move towards pluralism and shift in their policies. They need strong historical and spiritual tradition to uplift the social standard of the community. African American writers realised the importance of egalitarian society and multiculturalism. They also stress on the revision of the history of their freedom fighter to motivate the members of the community. They know that they are the followers of a strong religion and believer of a mighty God. They also realise the importance of their rich history that is filled with the tales of their brave leaders. They realise the need of reminding this to their community and bringing them in the mainstream nationalism to face the growing challenges of the racial society. They are also aware of the fact that ignoring these assets, the entire effort of fighting against racial discrimination becomes pointless and inconclusive. They portray the community's struggles to gain legal rights, participate in mainstream national politics, define a new identity, and provide moral and motivational support are the main objectives of this study.

The entire aims and goals cannot be achieved without framing pluralistic society therefore, the study purposefully includes these ideas that teach the community, children and other members that "Blacks and Whites should try to understand each other so they can get along" (Johnson, 2010, p. 237). These ideas are helpful for the community to live with a unique approach in society. Pluralist perspective is a term used by postmodern theorists to describe such intentions of minorities. Through this idea, they accept and encourage the coexistence of all the diversities in the society. This can execute new truth, politics, identity, and freedom of choice across race, ethnicity, religion and any other dividing phenomena. It tends to re-calibrate past values that are acceptable among the community in achieving their

objectives and desires ignoring their differences. The idea may attract any of the groups coexisting in the society because it is always “resolving’ the dispute to its advantage” (Sim, 2011, p. 9). African Americans need to look beyond traditional boundaries and ignore their racial barriers in framing pluralistic viewpoints and striving toward the goals of self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. This was also helpful for the black people to deconstruct negative image associated with them during slavery. This culture was common in those days and “Slavery has been the single most important factor defining the status of African Americans because it classified black people as subhuman in ways that continue to shape race relations” (Handel, 2006, p. 89). African Americans countered this aggravated situation of slavery and segregation and paved new ways of success with the help of their strong history by strengthening their roots and widening their wings by following the teaching of not only bible but also teaching of the Holy Qur’an. They have strong historical ties and stories of their freedom fighters and ancestors that were not common among other communities living in America; therefore, they left race-based division that laid the foundation of a pluralistic society. They deviate from the idea of mono-culturalism that can no “longer provide us with the national identities we need. The formation of multi-cultural civic identities requires a new way of drawing our political maps (Mennens, 2011, p. 2). It quite clear that only under the protection of a multicultural society, a progressive environment could be possible. In this regard, Gen Mennens (2001), a postmodern thinker claims that in today's world; politics of recognition is the only way to ensure a multicultural society. In this context, Hutcheon (1989) also emphasizes, “The notion of ideology both as a system of representation and as a necessary and unavoidable part of every social totality” (p. 13). The community in collaboration with states must ensure their contribution in mainstream progress because politics is the practical manifestation of their culture (Mennens, 2011).

Discrimination still exists in America, even though it is a diversified country. The African American population is made up of migrants from Africa who is

transported to America for labor. It is expected that some biases and prejudices may exist. Among other groups, African Americans have special challenges, and they respond to deal with their challenges. Postmodern theorists believe that mono-cultural representation cannot provide authentic identity or assist in the resolution of racial, social, and economic conflicts, they emphasize the importance of intercultural flexibility. This notion becomes inevitable for African American families because “Mono-cultural nationalism can no longer provide us with the national identities we need. The formation of multi-cultural civic identities requires a new way of drawing our political maps” (Mennens, 2011, p. 2). They need acceptance and recognition, therefore; their cultural and civic identities can only be recognized when ethnic minorities share ideas, adapt values, and “minority cultures should have specific rights to express and maintain their culture” (Mennens, 2011, p. 2). Postmodernism problematizes fix border identities and deviates from traditionally separate realities. They believe that “Enlightenment concepts of rationalism, centralism, and monoculture have to be replaced by notions of diffusion, negotiation, and diversity to make multiculturalism work successfully” (p. 5). The movement stresses the need for totality and collective ideology. They think that distances can be squeezed after establishing multicultural diversity and the “notion of ideology both as a system of representation and as a necessary and unavoidable part of every social totality” (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 13). The distorted truth has no value because society needs “revaluation of all values” (Sim, 2011, p. 20). Postmodernism focuses on “rejection of the idea that there are foundations to our systems of thought, or belief, that lie beyond question” (p. 9). Similarly, Sim (2011) also focuses on the inclusion of all the social groups in politics for collective progress and prosperity because there is a “particular interest in the marginalized groups whose difference keeps them excluded from political power” (p. 22). To achieve all these goals, the formation of egalitarian society is inevitable in this context. In this context, postmodern thinkers search for new ways of progress and growth. Castle (2007) in the case of representation suggests such a

metafiction that "aims to revolutionize literature as well as the society that produces it by forcing readers to look at language and texts in new ways" (p. 145). They suggest that minorities need new construction and explore ways of framing new identities and making strategies to cope with racism.

Hutcheon (1989) believes that "We see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past" (p. 21). He focuses on the liberation from traditional and cultural bonds. He focuses on the creation and utilization of new phenomena that ensure their performance because "unpresentable is an act of liberation" (p. 146). Postmodernists thinkers believe that it is inevitable for an unrepresentable group that "one party to the dispute enforces its view on the other, 'resolving' the dispute to its advantage" (Sim, 2011, p. 9). They focus on the necessity of individual excellence and the development of positive character traits and motivation to cope with existing racial concerns. Their writer use religion and history to give them new direction and move towards integration and stability that is the main objective of this study.

3. Research Methodology

Technically speaking, research methods are process involved in accomplishing the task. This includes sources, ways, and tools used during analysis and critical evaluation of research problems (Kothari 7-8). The research procedure is "A research method comprises the overall strategy followed in collecting and analyzing data" (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2008, 28). The study implies qualitative methods of research defined as "collection, analysis and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., non-numeric) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon" (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2008, p. 7). The textual analysis method has been used to analyze and interpret collected data. Belsey believes that textual analysis is indispensable for research including English, cultural history, and cultural studies. The researcher is eager to find the role of religion and history in promoting the ideas of integration and

stability in African American community and he has used postmodernism as theoretical framework to analyse the date.

4. Data Analysis

African American community face dual challenges in the society. At one hand, they have to face the prejudice of whites and on the other hand, they have to deal with internal issues among the society. African American parents, political activists and writers must play a dual role: promoting a distinct cultural identity among blacks and also preparing them for the prejudices of the hostile white world. They focus to deconstruct the negative images associated with them in media and other information agencies. To fulfill this purpose, they use the stories of past leaders and source of religion to instill optimism and hope for their bright future (Handel, 2006). Jacqueline Woodson in her novel also highlights the value of these sources. Her grandmother used to teach the Holy Bible and Qur'an to promote the idea of peace, comfort, content and harmony among them. She advises her children "Let the Bible, my grandmother says, become your sword and your shield" (Woodson, 2014, p. 121). She struggles to protect her children from the negative impact of the society create by white world's hostility. She also urges them to be safe and patient against the growing racial issues. She supports them to manage their issues and work under the auspices of the parents and social leader to love and accept their images as the test of God and live peacefully with other coexisting communities because they have "No voting. No fighting. No cursing. No wars. We will never go to war" (p. 170). She instills in her community the values of plurality, peace and comfortability. She knows that religion could give them new ways of success and peace. It is now the community's major job to prepare the children for the world's biases. Jacqueline castes plurality as the remedy for the problems of life. She relates the stories of her school where students from various cultures come together and study. She encourages the members of the community and give them lesson to live in peace and harmony as suggested by the teaching of bible. She also give retraces from the teaching of the holy Qur'an. She

brings them together and uses the bible and the holy Qur'an as sources of inspiration and motivation.

In her novel, Jacqueline Woodson honors the creed and faith of her community. She prefers not only in Christianity but gives importance to all the religion especially, the Holy Quran. She thinks that religion is the significant mean to ward off black-colored, self ashamed and create a sense of plural society. She utilizes religion as a source of bring people of her community together and give them new hope and inspiration.

Jacqueline pledges and believes "in God and evolution. I believe in the Bible and the Qur'an. I believe in Christmas and the New World. There is good in each of us no matter who we are or what we believe in" (p. 315). She thinks that this would embark high values and sense of belonging among African American community. This can benefit the society in multiple ways. Jacqueline ensures acceptance and dependence on all the coexisting communities. In addition to this, she presents religion as a source of believing and supporting communities in pursuit of plurality unity, faith, determination, and cooperation among each others. This leads to the inclusion of new ideas in the society which are based on plurality of the society Castle (2007). He asserts that presenting the most unrepresentable is the act of liberation for the active groups of the society. This encourages the community to take part in all the active and wave off the impact of discrimination and rejection. Believing in religion give them opportunity to accept all the differences and give them chances to live together in a plural society. Jacqueline thinks that she is confident enough seeing "Black people and White people coming together" (p. 315). This a gives genuine feelings of tolerance and adjustment among all groups regardless of differences or ethnic divisions. This creates a general sense of accept all the groups and bring them together in order to create an egalitarian society. Jacqueline openly asserts that she believes in "nonviolence and "Power to the People." I believe in my little brother's pale skin and my own dark brown" (p. 315). This gives her encourage to overlook

differences of all the groups and live in peace with them without expressing any kind of prejudice and biases.

God has created all the human being equal, and this idea generate the sense of believe in oneself and focusing the execution of talent and individual traits of all human beings. This opens up new world leaving all differences aside and bring all the groups together as one entity in mainstream nationalism. Jacqueline Woodson shows her intention to frame a plural society in the novel by using the religion as a source of pluralism that a new “world opens itself up to you. And all the worlds you are— Ohio and Greenville Woodson and Irby Gunnar's child and Jack's daughter Jehovah's Witness and nonbeliever listener and writer Jackie and Jacqueline—gather into one world called you” (p. 317). Religion brings people together and give them new way to forget the difference among them. Jacqueline shows her believe in the providence of "God and evolution. I believe in the Bible and the Qur'an. I believe in Christmas and the New World. There is good in each of us no matter who we are or what we believe in" (p. 315). This shows the idea of highness as for as the religious bent of mind of the community is concerned. Religion is used as a source of prosperity and peace in the novel and gives the community a new ways of plurality and comfortability.

Jacqueline also relates the past stories of their freedom fighters in her novel. Her grandmother tells the stories of their leader to the people of her community that motivate them. She relates the stories of their bravery that help them resist the discriminating attitude. She relates various incidents of freedom fighters like those of "Montgomery, only seven years have passed since Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus" (p. 10). She uses these incidents to encourage the people and prepare them to fight like the leaders of the community. She also cites the example of Rosa Park who resists the dominance of whites over herself and the people of the community.

African Americans relates these stories to their coming generation in very commendable ways. They want to prepare them mentally and physically to fight against the existing racial hierarchies. Jacqueline through her story condemns the rejection of her community and related the ways their leaders have been opposing discrimination in past. At the time of the birth of Jacqueline, her father names her 'jack' that indicates an opposite gender, but she reports that by naming a "girl Jack, my father said, and she can't help but grow up strong" (p. 12). this shows a sense of insecurity in her. He wants to bring up her like a male freedom fighter to resist biased attitude around her. Leaders of the community are ideals for them, and they want to prepare their children to follow their footsteps to fight against racial biases of the society.

African American writers teach their people to follow the marchers' pattern and agenda. The society commends these leaders of freedom and wants to continue to encourage their children to become fearless and brave like their leaders. This positive socialization encourages them and their "teenagers get trained to sit tall, not cry, swallow back fear" (p. 90). This ends their internal fear and gives them new opportunity to fight against the existing racial propaganda.

She fosters in her community the values of black positivism black nationhood. She calls Robert, her brother, a freedom fighter if "You are doing the right thing, Robert? my mother wanted to know. Yes, my uncle said. I promise you" (p. 264). She supports him and ensure him the he is right in his aim and will continue to follow him in pursuit of her freedom. She knows the value of a decent behaviour that will help them fight against external agenda that is always ready to put them at disadvantage. She recommends Robert that "She is not afraid, she says, to die for what she believes in but doesn't plan to die without a fight" (p. 300).

White-Johnson (2010) states that minority should avoid these race-based division and should strive for collective wisdom and harmony. Although this is a challenging goal to achieve, the entire community support the freedom fighters to

remove all the hurdles of the ways that hinder their freedom. the whole community stands with them and notices "mother there, marchers and dogs and kittens all blending and us now there in each moment beside her" (Woodson, 2014, p. 99). They pass these stories to their coming generation in a new oriented way that could encourage them to fight against white supremacists. Jacqueline relates the story of Ruby who always stand by the side of freedom fighters and Jacqueline also longs, "I do not know if I'll be strong like Ruby" (p. 11). This makes them unique and a collective community that never leaves their leader alone. All they are ready to stand by their leaders and continue fighting the same battle as their leaders have been doing in past. They believe that one day "their protests rising into song: Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome someday" (p. 10). The entire community support them and encourage them. According to postmodern thinkers, a book is not a complete embodiment of reality; it can be construed to create a reality based on the reader's subjectivity. Her mother related the story of her past that she used to show her affection and love her leaders. She wants all the member of the community to be like the their leaders and believes that "if these hands will become Malcolm's—raised and fisted or Martin's—open and asking" (Woodson, 2014, p. 11). Similarly, Maria, the friend of Jacqueline also promises to fight along with their freedom fighters. They assure one another that we are not "afraid to die, Maria and I shout, fists high, for what we believe in. But both of us know—we'd rather keep believing and live" (p. 301). They want to deconstruct the negative images associated with them. They also want to change the idea that whites people usually beat them and put them in prison. They give them new way to fight against the propaganda created by white supremacists. The community promise to fight with leaders and pledges never to leave their struggles of independence. She uses positive words and image about their leaders in the story. They use words like 'brave,' 'not scared', and 'daring' to inculcate pride and respect for their leaders and the freedom fighters in the eyes of their children.

Hence it is proved that the whole community is inspired by the freedom fighters and ready to follow their footsteps to continue the battle of their independence.

5. Conclusion

The paper sums up that Jacqueline Woodson very artistically uses religion and history as sources of integration, plurality and stability among her community in her novel and stresses to learn from teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Bible the true path of success. She values the ideas of peace, comfort and equality for all the diverse groups of the society and shows that these are the sources of protection for community's faith and optimism in overcoming racial hatred and racial division. Similarly, African Americans' history of freedom is aptly discussed and appreciated in the novel. The great freedom fighters are highly commended, and their ideas and footsteps are recommended as guiding principles for social and political stability. Jacqueline through her story, applauds pluralistic approach towards mainstreaming to transform the political identities of the community. Jacqueline uses the example of Rosa Park, Malcom X, Martin Luther King and other freedom fighters who didn't accept white supremacy rather demanded equal rights for all the ethnic groups and their entitlement to the country's natural resources. Religion and history left deep impact on the life of the characters as portrayed in the novel who accept reality, appreciate their culture, and coexist peacefully with others and pledged to continue the journey of their leaders for independence. They bring decency in behavior, patience in attitude, promise not to remind each other of their past repression and rejection as strategies to cope with racial concerns around them. They also promise to follow the rules and live peacefully with other communities as instructed by their religion and leaders.

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