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“Who Am I? And How May I Become Myself?” – An Honest Self-scrutiny through Paul  
Beatty’s *Sell Out*

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### **Abstract**

Today’s world is full of strife and tensions, among countries, societies, or religions. In this highly poisoned world, people never look back into themselves. They think about others and how to underestimate others and themselves. People got really mad and consequently psychiatric institutions mushroomed all over the world. But nobody realizes the fact that all these problems are mirroring out the need to look back into us, “who am I? And How may I become myself?” are the questions every individuals ask or seek to themselves at least once in their life-time. This paper analyses the significance of these questions in the life of Afrikans through Paul Beatty’s debut novel *Sell Out*.

There are mixed breeds of people who, in their beginning days in America, voluntarily mated with Native Americans and were forced to mate with Americans of European descent. Today, they call themselves Afrikans. Though Afrikans have a breed cultural heritage, their cultural values are inherently unique. There is more to the Afrikans cultural evolution than is visible on the periphrase.

A paradox of human existence is that people are the same and people are different. When one disregards these differences, he /she may run the risk of making the whole group of people invisible. In many ways, the core essence of Afrikan people in American society has been invisible. Hilliard points out this tension a “Mental bondage is invisible violence . . . . As the ‘Western World’ has crooned to itself in narcissistic and ethnocentric abandon, one must remember Napoleon’s dictum that ‘history is a fable agreed upon . . . . ‘free your mind’ ”.

Do Afrikans wear masks to hide their essential identity? The central focus of this paper is the search of Afrikan identity and feeling at belongingness in American society. Paul Beatty, who has advanced degrees in psychology and creative writing, published four novels including *Sell Out* (2016), which has won the prestigious Man Booker Prize, is selected as a case study for this paper.

Paul Beatty once said: “When I teach,I always tell the students that something I got out of psychology is to listen to yourself”. His novel *Sell Out* is also described as a hilarious novel about post-racial California, which contains psychological experiment on blacks for getting an identity for themselves. As this novel contains psychological elements, the narrator at the novel has no first name and his surname is Me, which represents the entire Afrikans, although he has been called as Bonbon in some parts of the novel. He has grown up in Dickens, an agrarian ghetto community on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles. His father is a black intellectual activist who has conducted lots of psychological experiments on Afrikans to empower them to live in a post-racial America. For this, he has established a community named Dum Dum Donuts Community, and community empowering activities under the guidance of Dum Dum Donuts Intellectuals also. Thus in this novel ,Beatty invites readers to decide what to do with 21st century black man to achieve what he cries from the beginning.

Beatty suggests establishing a black identity in the present American society as a solution to all this problems. For this, he puts forward to questions like-“who am I ? and How can I be that person ? ”(40). If the Afrikan is able to answer these questions sincerely, he /she will be

get out of all psychological problems, they are facing in present America. And answer to these questions evolved in four different solutions in the novel.

Firstly, these questions have been asked to the narrator's father by himself. And his father tried to answer these questions through his various psychological experiments. In the novel, his psychologist father uses him as his "Own Anna Freud" by conducting experiments on him in order to make him a real black person.

And in his quest to unlock the keys to mental freedom, I was his Anna Freud, his little case study, and when he wasn't teaching me how to ride, he was replicating famous social science experiments with me as both the control and the experimental group. (28-29)

For instance, the father ties his four-year-old son's right hand behind his back so that he can grow to be left-handed; right brained, and well-centered. Or, he tests the "bystander effect" as it applies to the "black community" (29) on the narrator when he was eight years old by beating the boy in front of a throng of bystanders who don't stand around too long. But what does it mean to be black- laughing to keep from crying in an America, insisting that it's moved on from their trauma- is the tension at the heart of Beatty's writing. Beatty writes up an incident in the novel.

Two months later, a census worker shows up at my door, takes one look at me, and says, "you foul nigger. As a black man, what do you have to say for yourself?" and as a black man, I never have anything to say for myself. Hence, the need for a motto, which, if we had. I'd raise my fist, shout it out, and slam the door in the government's face. But we don't. So I mumble Sorry and scribble my initials next to the box marked 'Black, African-American, Negro, Coward'. (44)

His psychologist father is a Nigger Whisperer, the ad-hoc mentor who talks young black men off bridges and highway overpasses, and out of their moments of beaten-down desperation. But he failed to reach that goal of empowering his son and the whole black race through his studies. Finally, he burned all his findings published and perished-in utter desperation in the fire place. "I was a failed social experiment. A statistically insignificant son who'd shattered his hopes for both me and the black race"(35). Sadly, his father has shot to death, while talking down to a young man in front of a Swat team.

Secondly, at the moment of his father's death, the question is asked to the narrator himself. "So introspective questions like "who am I?" And how can I be that person?" didn't pertain to me then, because I already knew the answer. Like the entire town of Dickens, I was my father's child, a product of my environment, and nothing more"(40). The real problem formed when he became alone in the society and realized just the life he's going to lead. "Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue how to become myself" (40). And the whole novel is an answer to these questions.

After the death of his father, temporarily he became a nigger-whisperer. At this time, he understood who is he, and how he should become that person. Curiously enough, instead of his father's little social experiment, the narrator turns his neighborhood into a larger sociological study by promoting segregation to the extent of drawing a white boundary line around the space. When his town Dickens is taken off the maps, or in the nightly weather reports and all of the town's signs are removed overnight, he reckons it's bad for local morality. It is evident that "[b]ut the city of Dickens's disappearance was no accident. It was part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down "(57). So he decides to reinstate Dickens by working on cohesion and collective identity among the Afrikan community. For this, he established Dickens on two spheres; geographical and emotional. For a geographical positioning, he paints and hangs his own Dickens signs. He circles the town with strip of white paint to say we're here, and this is Dickens.

It took about six weeks to finish painting the border and the labels . . . . When the niggers were just as trifling, but for some reason they felt like they belonged on this side . . . . The implication of solidarity and community it represented. And while I hadn't quite reestablished Dickens, I had managed to quarantine it. And community-cum-leper colony wasn't a bad start. (108-109)

For an emotional positioning, he reintroduced racial segregation with the help of a volunteer slave, Hominy Jenkins, and a determined school teacher, Charisma.

In order to replace Dickens emotionally, the narrator's prime task is to save Hominy, the last surviving member of *The Little Rascals*. Bonbon brought an identity to Hominy by giving enough inspiration to think who is he?

Sometimes we just have to accept who we are and act accordingly. I'm a slave. That's who I am. It's the role I was born to play. A slave who just also happens to be an actor. But being black ain't. Method acting. Lee Strasberg could teach you how to be a tree, but he couldn't teach you how to be a nigger. This is the ultimate nexus between craft and purpose, and we won't be discussing this again. I'm your nigger for life, and that's it. (71)

That is, his life has lost direction until he reunites with Bonbon, someone who can finally fulfill the role of 'massa' in his self-imposed role as slave.

It's not just slavery Bonbon and Hominy reintroduce to Dickens. Instead, they introduced segregation too. It appears piecemeal; first on a city bus, and then at the local middle school. But how does one segregate a 'shanty town' already deprived of whites? The answer is, by creating the illusion of segregation. His second task is to put up signage announcing the development of a crosstown rival school for privileged white children to be built across from the predominantly black and Mexican middle school. Hominy said: "massa" signs are powerful things. It almost feels like Dickens exists out there in the smog somewhere. Hominy, what feels better, getting whipped or looking at that sign?" Hominy thought a moment. "The whip feels good on the back, but the sign feels good in the heart" (88). Hence, by establishing competition, the children are faced to tackle their complacency and work hard to maintain the rights reaped after the Civil Rights Movement. It is as if Dickens needs to go back to move forward.

Segregate the school. As soon as I said it, I realized that segregation would to be the key to bringing Dickens back. The communal feeling of the bus would spread to the school and then permeate the rest of the city. Apartheid united black South Africa, why couldn't it do the same for Dickens?" (167)

Bonbon despite of his profound self-knowledge, a mystery even to himself, always searching answer to his father's questions. "who am I? And how may I become myself?" He is irreducible to certain extent, a blunderer at constant struggle with his self, but a striver nonetheless.

Thus, Beatty got a fantastic handle on the complexities of racial identity and how that's depicted in the media and in popular culture; on how personal identity is enmeshed with group or collective identity; on how urban geography is mixed up in all these; and on the

intersection between self-love and self-hatred. Any way, with his continuous efforts, Dickens is put back on the map.

Thirdly, these questions point out to the identity of every African-born Americans; their dreams, hopes and potentialities in American Society. Is the melting pot of American Society really melts for the Afrikans or do the Afrikans have an identity of their own in the midst of multiculturalism. *Sell Out* brings the dwindling sunset of American possibility. It's a story of dark, nihilistic, pessimistic, and impolite ways of American approach, and how it makes a mockery of the dream that things will get better, that includes a new era of racial harmony is right around the corner. "That like the pigs, we all have our heads in the trough. While the hogs don't believe in God, the American dream, or the pen being mightier than the sword, they do believe in the Sunday paper, the Bible, black urban radio, and hot sauce" (53).

"That's the problem with history" (115), Bonbon thinks, regarding his friend Hominy, an old-timer who's disturbingly comfortable with how Jim Crow warped his outlook. Freedom vexes Hominy; instead, he lives in the past, carrying with him a constant thirst of being put back in his place. Bonbon says,

I'm jealous of Hominy's obliviousness, because he, unlike, America, has tuned the page. That's the problem with history, we like to think it's a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn't the paper its printed on. It's memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you. (115)

At the same time, Afrikans have a hope that, one day this segregation will surely erase from America as they forevisage. "As the blackness peeled from our hides, the melanin fizzing and dissipating into nothingness like antacids dissolving in tap water"(114). Eventually the narrator becomes a part of that history when he lands in front of the Supreme Court, the latest in the long line of landmark race-related cases, From 'Plessy V Ferguson' to the time they tried to bury everything. The same is evident in the following:

Carbon-date my pipe and determine whether I'm a direct descendant of Dred Scott; that colored conundrum who, as a slave living, in a free state, was man enough for his wife and kids, man enough to sue his master for his freedom, but not man enough for the Constitution, because in the eyes of the Court he was simply property: a black biped 'with no rights the white man was bound to respect'. (8)

American Constitution offers 'Equal Justice Under Law' and the narrator is showing up the reality.

In the fourth level, these questions challenge the reader to look honestly at themselves. Though the book is about race and racial stereotype from within and without, this is about identity at every level- individual, racial, community, human and country- these questions ring everywhere. That is, all the human beings experience self-love and self-hate at one point in their life. Beatty uses these weapons in his novel to acknowledge the audience that these elements may help one to answer these questions in their life. In the novel, he used the latter to power the former to know him. In a racial world, no matter how much we love our selves, our hood or race, our strongest force will break down once. And when we do, the people once protected by unnatural energies will have a reckoning with the world outside, one that will cast them as either hero or villain, no matter what their inspirations.

To conclude, what does it mean to speak of protecting or compromising 'our thing' when someone is always there to recall you that the most powerful man in America is black? The only solution is to opt out altogether- to reckon with that contradiction rather than pretend we can resolve it. The novel's attempt to reach for a message or find an explanation of why we've had our delicate, valuable sensibilities dragged over hot coals ( an experience with inner values and of itself), provides in fact a fake catharsis that remains loyal to the novel's exuberant love of insoluble contradictions. Is America worth loving? As much as the novel offers an answer, it is, but. . . Whatever deep wells of anguish, mad laughter, uncertainty, and negation lie in those ellipses is what the novel attempts to tap, and at its very best, one gets faint intimations of a powerful strain in Afrikan art, the poisonous joke or apocalyptic fantasy of America consumed on a funeral pyre, with the hope that it maybe purified and reborn, but with no assurance of that resurrection.

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