

The Paradoxes of Identity in Michelle Cliff's Novel *Abeng* (*)

Abid Alarabi Labidi

Assistant Professor of English Literature, Department of English Language and Literature,
College of Arts, King Saud University, Riyadh

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Abstract. Based on a close textual reading of Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff's novel *Abeng*, this paper investigates a case in point of Caribbean identity complexity. In particular, I examine the psychological, racial, historical, and social dilemmas generated by female mulatto identity in the contentious context of colonial Jamaica in the 1950s. In this context, the very existence of the female mulatto systemically called to mind the traumatic memories of sexual exploitation, rape, racial and gender nullification, and other forms of aggression the black female was victim of under the three-century long slavery enterprise of Europe. I explore how and why the female mulatto's attempts at identity negotiation and self-assertion and her struggle for social and racial acceptance are often met with outward rejection by the very society she is part of. I also investigate how the female mulatto's contradictory legacies and conflictual affiliations (being at once black and white, descendent of slaves and masters, colonized and colonizer, and African and European) hinder her from claiming any identity and aggravate her sense of loss. My paper starts with the assumption that the precarious identity of the female mulatto is, in fact, inseparable from the deeper complexities that have characterized black Caribbean identity and history for entire centuries.

Caribbean Identity: A History of Complications

It is a fact that the problematic identity of Cliff's protagonist in *Abeng*¹ (1984) cannot be studied in isolation from the deeper complexities that characterize Caribbean identity and history at large. Indeed, the complexity of Caribbean identity has profound roots in the troubled and instable history the region has witnessed since its 'discovery' by the 'pioneers' of European Capitalism and Imperialism in the late fifteenth century. The Caribbean history of racial encounters, its hybrid cultural structure, and the diversity of its ethnic map (made up of Caribs, Amerindians, Africans, Europeans, East Indians, Chinese, and Middle Easterners) have made Caribbean identity a very complex subject to both define and deal with. Distinguished Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall perceives of Caribbean identity as

"production, which is never complete," and "always in process" (222). Arguing along similar lines, critic Bénédicte Ledent describes Caribbean identity as a "fluctuating and subterranean" phenomenon that "diffracts into an 'intricate, unceasing branching of cultures' and, in web-like fashion, proliferates simultaneously in various directions" ("From a New-West Poetics" 31).

It may be worthwhile to dwell briefly upon the major historical events that have influenced, if not entirely shaped, Caribbean identity. Out of the wide spectrum of events that have largely moulded Caribbean identity and culture, one can mainly mention: the conquest of the region by European 'Conquistadors', the decimation of the native Caribs², slavery, colonialism, 'flawed' independence,

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1 Michelle Cliff. *Abeng* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984). Further reference to this edition will be mentioned in the text.

2 C.L.R. James gives a detailed analysis of how the brutality of European 'conquistadores' hastened the decimation of the native Indians: "The Spaniards, the most advanced Europeans of their day, annexed the island [Haiti], called it Hispaniola, and took the backward natives under their protection. They introduced Christianity, forced labor in mines, murder, rape, blood-hounds, strange diseases, and artificial famine (by the destruction of =

contemporary neo-colonial dependency, and Third World status. Louis James emphasizes the "conflicting identities" of the Caribbean, which he defines as an "unstable region suspended between cultures" (2): a mixture of African, European, and East Indians traditions brought to the Caribbean thus hybridizing its cultural, racial, and historical structure. These historical influences do in many ways complicate the Caribbean individual's identity structure, self-perception, and racial consciousness. Trinidadian scholar C.L.R. James explains how the uniqueness of Caribbean history has largely moulded its people's culture and identity structure:

The West Indies has never been a traditional colonial territory with clearly distinguishable economic and political relations between two different cultures. Native culture there was none. The aboriginal Amerindian civilization had been destroyed. Every succeeding year, therefore, saw the labouring population, slave or free, incorporating into itself more and more of the language, customs, aims and outlook of its masters. (405)

Shaped by the history of "the black Atlantic" (whereby the triangular trade in human flesh took place), the Caribbean world "yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* xi). Due to this peculiar history, Caribbean identity appears all the more complex and fragmentary. Similarly to the region's troubled history and vexed cultural encounters, Caribbean identity is inherently complex and unsettled. It is a mixture of all different influences and a set of intrinsically multi-layered identities. Cliff's view of the problematic nature of Caribbean identity is expressed in her novel *Free Enterprise* (1994), where she defines the Caribbean as a "confused universe" "with no center and no outward edge. Where almost everything was foreign. Language, people, landscape even" (6). The lack of boundaries ("no center" and "no outward edge") characteristic of the Caribbean world is the major cause of its people's centerless-ness and lack of roots. Even the "landscape" is "foreign" to its dwellers, an allusion to the initial displacement of slaves and their subsequent alienation and loss in The New World.

= cultivation to starve the rebellious). These and other requirements of the higher civilization reduced the native population from an estimated half-a-million, perhaps a million, to 60,000 in 15 years" (3-4). See also Benitez-Rojo (55-56).

The complex nature of Caribbean identity has led to a remarkable preoccupation on the part of Caribbean writers with issues of identity articulation, voice retrieval, and self-knowledge. It is, therefore, no surprise that a great deal of recent Caribbean novels evolve around the re-inscription of identities and the re-centering of marginalized/or lost voices. Caribbean literature is, in fact, "replete" with "texts in which men and women attempt to retrieve and define a self denied by centuries of oppression" (Ledent, "Here, There, and Everywhere" 76). Reflecting their writers' descent from a catastrophic history of slavery, colonialism, and third-world status a wide range of contemporary Caribbean writers intersect in the mapping of complex identities and the excavation of untold hi/stories. Benitez-Rojo remarks that "[e]very more or less serious effort at writing a novel from the Caribbean," "usually implies this search [for identity]" (187).

***Abeng*: A Synopsis**

Cliff's quasi-autobiographical novel *Abeng* takes place in colonial Jamaica in the 1950s when this "prizest possession of the Crown" (36) was caught between the bleak memory of slavery and the grim reality of colonialism, wretchedness, and depredation. *Abeng* traces the efforts of Clare Savage (Cliff's half-white, half-black protagonist) to come to terms with her complex mulatto identity, with all the conflictual histories and traumatic memories such an identity generates. This twelve twelve-year-old Jamaican girl is deeply perplexed by the enigmatic identity she inherits from her rival ancestors; being at once the offspring of African slaves and European slave-owners. Clare's efforts to reclaim a clear-cut subjectivity occur in reaction to the identity precariousness and loss of voice against which she, as a female, mulatto, and colonial subject, struggles. Thus, Clare "feels like a shadow...like a ghost" (154), an indication of her inability to fit into a clear-cut identity and undo the enigmas underlying her problematic history and roots. Clare exists at the crossroads of conflicting and hierarchical legacies, affiliations, origins, and shades, hence the array of interrogations she struggles with as to what ultimately constitutes her own identity. A real prisoner of paradoxical familial, racial, and historical affiliations, Clare is "split into two parts--white and not white, town and country, scholarship and privilege, Boy and Kitty," her white father and coloured mother, respectively (119). As one critic points out, Clare

Savage is “split” between “schizophrenic” “world[s] of dispersed spaces and discontinuity” (Gikandi 251). Burdened with the many enigmas of her identity, Clare negotiates throughout the novel the conflicting components of her subject-hood in the hope of reaching an “explanation of her own life” (*Abeng* 72) and a “knowledge of where [she] came from” (42).

“What’s in a Name?”

The complexity of Clare’s identity and her affiliation with diverging legacies and histories are articulated by the very name Cliff chooses for her protagonist. Indeed, one should not overlook the many implications inherent in the name Clare Savage. Added to its surface color denotations, the name Clare Savage suggests dual subject positions as well as deeper historical, cultural, and psychological implications that go far beyond the mere act of naming. Quite significantly, Cliff reminds us that Clare’s name “is intended to represent her as a crossroads character, with her feet (and head) in (at least) two worlds” (“Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character” 265). We notice here the effect produced by the expressions “crossroads” and “two worlds”; they both bring to the fore Clare’s ‘suspension’, so to speak, between diverging legacies and subject positions that greatly impede her identity construction and voice claiming as a female, mulatto, and colonial subject.

On the one hand, the word ‘Clare’ is indeed indicative of white shade, a long history of colonial presence in Jamaica, and an affiliation with “the mother country,” “that perfect place across the sea,” as “her father’s stories” and white “teachers’ lessons” strongly point out to Clare (*Abeng* 36). Thus, Clare’s first name is a reminder of her indisputable whiteness, a privilege she must uphold, as her white father insists, against the impurities of “this still wild island,” i.e. colonial Jamaica (36). Jamaica’s wildness operates in sharp contrast with “civilized” England, where “everyone was white” and “no one had to be told which fork to use” (36). This noticeable binarism (“England” versus Jamaica, “wild” versus “civilized,” and “white” versus black) was, in fact, central to the ideological and discursive formations that had sustained Europe’s centuries-long imperial project. Through these binaries, blacks were denied “the right to their own identities,” and became the “engulfable margins of the imperial center” (Brydon and Tiffin 15). Hall further explores the aims of the mentioned imperial binaries:

Vis-à-vis the developed West, we are very much ‘the same.’ We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the ‘Other.’ We are the outer edge, the ‘rim’ of the metropolitan world--always ‘South’ to someone else’s *El Norte*. (227-228)

On the other hand, Clare’s last name (Savage) conjures her descent, on her mother’s side, from African slaves, stigmatized by imperial discourse as ‘savages’ and ‘beasts.’ Clare’s last name aligns her with those who experienced firsthand the White Man’s savagery and brutality in the Caribbean mainly through the enterprises of slavery and colonialism. The brutality and savagery inflicted on Clare’s black ancestors by white autocratic masters and slave owners have echoes in her family’s very history. To Clare’s most acrimonious realization, Judge Savage, one of her white ancestors, burnt his hundred slaves on the eve of emancipation in 1834 as a protest against the abolition of slavery and the subsequent disruption of the parameters of his position as an affluent slave owner, high-handed master, and imperious aristocrat.

In a nutshell, Clare’s name has more to it than a simple or arbitrary act of naming. The name Cliff chooses for her female mulatto protagonist is rather ‘opulent’, so to speak, with significant historical allusions and weighty identity symbols. By naming her hybrid heroine ‘Clare Savage’, Cliff brings to the fore the array of sharp contradictions and irreconcilable divergences Clare, as representative of mulatto subject-hood, is positioned amidst. Added to its denotation of surface paradoxical color shades, the name ‘Clare Savage’ signals deeper and more complex contradictions against which Cliff’s heroine is torn apart: Europe and Africa, whiteness and blackness, civilization and savagery, slaves and masters, colonizer and colonized, etc. While ‘Clare’ positions our protagonist in the line of those who carried out the aggressions of slavery and colonialism, ‘Savage’ aligns her with the victimized blacks who experienced (for entire centuries) the bleak and traumatic history of enforced deportation, involuntary banishment far from home, arduous inhuman bondage under slavery, and scandalous exploitation and neglect under colonialism.

The Enigmas of Mulatto Identity

The most challenging question that preoccupies Clare’s mind and consciousness throughout *Abeng* is the enigma of her mulatto identity and the “double consciousness” it generates. Gilroy defines “double

consciousness" as the "striving to be both European and black" (1). This is indeed the very condition Clare wrestles with while attempting to articulate her voice and assert her identity as a female mulatto figure in Jamaica's colonial society. Before I move to the exploration of the complexities of mulatto identity in *Abeng*, I would like to briefly dwell upon the meaning(s) of mulatto identity and its historical, social, and psychological implications in the wider Caribbean context.

"From the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism," black-white mixed blood (also known as "creolisation," "metisage," "mestizaje," and "hybridity") has been often regarded as "a litany of pollution and impurity" (Gilroy 2). Anzaldúa underlines the "dilemma of mixed breed," "psychic restlessness," and "dual of multiple personality" which often "plague" the complex figure of the mulatto (208). In their interesting text *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Bill Ashcroft et al. shed ample light on the etymology, usage, and implications of the term "mulatto":

Mulatto: From the Spanish word for 'young mule' (1595), referring to the progeny of a European and a negro (OED). The term is sometimes used interchangeably with *mestizo/metisse* to mean a mixed or miscegenated society and the culture it creates. However, its usage is usually confined to the classifications of miscegenation employed in racist slave discourse, specifically referring to a slave who is one half white (147).

Quite significantly, the mulatto figure is also widely known in the Caribbean as the "tragic mulatto" (Bost 674). This label refers to the horrendous encounter behind the emergence of the mulatto as the offshoot of an enforced sexual liaison between slaves and their masters. More precisely, the mulatto signalled his/her descent from the rape of a black female slave by a white master, hence the "neurosis" and "schizophrenia" often operative within the mulatto's consciousness and structure of feeling (Adisa 207, 209). The mulatto's hybrid category has more to it than the simple indication of a white-black racial admixture. The profound meanings and implications of mulatto identity can be understood only if placed within their historical and social contexts. Indeed, the mulattos' very existence and social image have been "forced upon them by the historical circumstances, politics, and racial dynamics of their times" (Bost 675). The following definition sheds light on some of the profound implications of

what it means to be mulatto in the Caribbean:

Mulattoes do not fit simply into any single identity category. They exist on the cusp of dual belonging or dual alienation: Either they are both white and non-white, or they are neither white nor not-white. As a result of the uncertainty of classification surrounding the biracial subject, and the frequent difficulty of ascertaining racial ancestry through exterior appearance, race becomes ambiguous, unmoored from biological essence. (Bost 675)

The above definition captures the psychological, existential, and social connotations of the term mulatto, both as "an identity category" and a social label. Bost draws the ambivalence resulting from miscegenation and the way it impedes the mulatto's identity claiming. The mulatto's identity impediments are caused by the inability to "fit simply into any single identity category" and his/her suspension between confirmation and denial: "belonging" and "alienation." Mulatto identity is also fraught with extreme confusion (suggested by the quite puzzling sentence "Either they are both white and non-white, or they are neither white nor not-white"), indecision (indicated by the "uncertainty of classification" and the "frequent difficulty of ascertaining racial ancestry"), and negation. This negation is suggested by the use of negative forms and negative prefixes in the words "uncertainty" and "unmoored."³

Much of Clare's racial uncertainty stems from her hybrid mulatto identity. Indeed, Clare's white-black mixed identity weighs heavily upon her mind and consciousness, as she cannot hide her mixed shade. Clare is, thus, divided between diverging shades of color, which she can neither easily embrace nor deny altogether. Clare's ambivalent identity stems from her standing between her father's European whiteness and her mother's African blackness, two shades in perpetual antagonism in Clare's colonial society. Clare is, therefore, caught between the dichotomous extremes of the world she inhabits: "two poles of a world, two poles in perpetual conflict: a genuinely Manichean concept of the world," to use words from Fanon (44-45).

3 In her article "Towards a New Consciousness," Anzaldúa suggests that the mulatto is inevitably "torn between ways," and lives in "a state of perpetual transition" due to the mixed and cross-fertilization he/she descends from (208): "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness" (208).

Clare's efforts to find balance and bring together the diverging extremes of her blended identity are challenged by the rigid dichotomies separating the worlds she inherits: a "white" world she cannot fully own and another "colored" one she cannot totally disown. So, Clare is a suspended figure who is "too refined and sensitive to live under the repressive conditions endured by ordinary blacks" and "too colored to enter the white world" (Anne Williams, qtd. in Deena 19). Intrigued by her society's classification of its people on the ground of "race and color and lightening" (*Abeng* 149), Clare appears as a "racial being" *par excellence*. By "racial being," I particularly refer to Clare's endeavours to reconstruct her identity out of diverging gradations of color. For instance, Clare wonders how she can ascertain her whiteness with a "colored mother, brown legs, and ashy knees" (73), or embrace blackness with those "green eyes and light skin," "things she had been born with" (127). The sombre shades ("colored," "brown," and "ashy") Clare inherits from her "colored" mother operate in total contrast with the "green eyes" and "light skin" passed on to her by her white father, hence Clare's racial dilemma and identity confusion. The accumulation of heavy color diction in these citations ("colored," "brown," "ashy," "green," and "light") is a clear indication of the critical role color occupies in the social context that *Abeng* narrates, i.e. colonial Jamaica in the 1950s.

Clare's identity perplexity should also be seen with due attention to the peculiar social and cultural environment she belongs to: a Jamaican society caught between the gruesome memory of slavery and the grim reality of colonialism. In this contentious context, Clare's mulatto identity cannot be without pejorative implications, and would serve as a constant reminder of a tragic history of sexual exploitation and body reification under slavery. C.L.R. James suggests that the mulatto's identity and social reception are determined by "the vice of [her] origins," i.e. the burdensome memory of rape she often stands for (40). "[M]ixed blood," Bost expounds, "is a curse and a reminder of an original rape and of the imbalance of power that led to coerced sexual relations between white men and black women" (675), hence the moral illicitness that haunts the mulatto's identity, and marks his/her social image. Commenting on the way Clare would be perceived by her fellow black Jamaicans, Cliff tells us the following: "I wanted to portray a character who would be the most despised character in Jamaica" ("Journey into Speech" 275).

This is a clear indication of the systematic rejection and scorn Clare would be subject to among her own people. The following extract from *Abeng* further portrays the female mulatto's suspect position and stereotypical image:

When the girls found out that Victoria Carter, whom everyone thought was the most beautiful girl in school, was the daughter of a Black man who worked as a gardener and an Englishwoman who had settled in Jamaica, her position in their eyes was transformed, and girls who had been quite intimidated by her, now spoke about her behind her back. (100)

This extract describes Victoria Carter (Clare's schoolmate) whose social image and identity resemble those of Clare. Victoria's prestigious "position" as "the most beautiful girl in school" is completely debunked when her mulatto identity is "found out," and divulged like a shameful secret. Consequently, Victoria immediately becomes the subject for harsh and scandalous gossip. The girls "speak[ing] about her behind her back" is an allusion to her dubious position after her mixed origins are made known to all her schoolmates. Victoria is at once the distinguished, "most beautiful girl" and the hybrid "daughter of a Black man" and "an Englishwoman," hence her fragmented and ambivalent identity. Even though she is the same person, Victoria is caught between two different subjectivities: one white, "intimidating," and jealousy generating, and another black, reprehensible, and "looked down upon." Because of her society's rigid racial categorizations, Victoria stands between irreconcilable worlds, none of which she fully possesses. Victoria's dilemma, we are told, derives from her socially unacceptable descent from a "Blackman" and "an Englishwoman."

Clare's social status and identity structure are not different from those of her schoolmate Victoria. This character is not simply Clare's classmate, but also her 'racial comrade', so to speak, in view of the mixed origins and racial hybridity at which both characters intersect. It may also be added that both characters dovetail perfectly in the above-defined "tragic mulatto" type, with the several psychic wounds and tragic memories this peculiar identity evokes. Added to their mixed parentages, Clare and Victoria crisscross at the contradictory histories with which they are both affiliated, hence their marginalization in a Jamaican society highly suspect of European whites, and trying hard to liberate itself from the grip of colonialism and the tragic memory of slavery.

People with mixed blood are, in fact, shunned not only because they recall a history of slavery and colonialism, but also because of the impurity and 'bastardy' they smack of. Despite the legal marriages they descend from, the very existence of Clare and Victoria is a constant reminder of an 'original sin' (a sexual rape) that had happened centuries before they were born. Clare's and Victoria's mulatto identities also bring to mind countless aggressions inflicted on slaves and their descendants by white enslavers, plantation-owners, overseers, and European colonizers. The two girls are, thus, perceived by their heavily traumatized society as outcast figures whose existence stirs up the tragic memory of enforced mixed-breed reproduction, hence their suspicious status and subsequent rejection.

Clare's identity troubles are made even worse by her father's assaults on blackness, an identity marker Clare can neither ignore nor get rid of altogether. Indeed, Clare was subject to a white-centered upbringing that sought to inculcate in her the imperfections of blackness and the virtues of whiteness. Clare was, for instance, taught by the racist entourage of her white father that "the worst thing to be--especially if you were a girl--was to be dark" (77). Clare was also warned that: "God meant that coons [black] and buckra [white] people were not meant to mix their blood," because "[o]nly sadness comes from [this] mixture" (164). Blood mixing is overstated for Clare not simply as a social aberration, but rather as a serious sin that God forbids. Clare is also warned against "speak[ing] in a familiar manner to people beneath [her] station," namely, those "with the congenital defect of poverty--or color" (99). Here, blackness is pictured to Clare as an inborn imperfection that systemically causes poverty and low social status.

Clare's complex colour consciousness is further complicated by her father's rigorous "lecture[s] about color" (127) and shade stratification. Indeed, Clare "had been carefully instructed by her father" "about race and color and lightening" (127). The expression "carefully instructed" reveals Boy's determination to instil in his daughter's structure of feeling racist attitudes he had himself inherited as part of his Anglo-centric upbringing in the Caribbean. Boy's obsession with color hierarchy and classification is noticeable in the redundant diction he deploys; the signifiers "race," "color," and "lightening" describe more or less the same signified: skin color. These diverse signifiers testify to the affluence of what we

might call Boy's "labels of othering."

For centuries, the black person's skin color has been a determining factor in his/her self-perception and reception by others. Indeed, from the time of slavery onwards, the black man's morphology (skin color, type of hair, and facial features) has often had negative social, historical, and psychic insinuations. Under slavery and colonialism, color, the "most obvious outward manifestation of race," was "made the criterion by which men [were] judged, irrespective of their social or educational achievements" (Alan Burns, qtd. in Fanon 118). The black man has, thus, been "the eternal victim of an essence," of "an appearance for which he is not responsible" (Fanon 35). In the Jamaican social context that *Abeng* narrates, a white shade is associated with beauty and opportunity, whereas dark skin is indicative of poverty and low social status. "To be darker," Adisa tells us, "was to be ignored, no matter how smart one was" (205). In the following extract, Fanon provides a wider view of what it means to be black in a racially divided world:

An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. [...] I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance. (110, 115)

Boy's "lectures about race" reflect his relentless efforts to completely 'whiten,' so to speak, his hybrid daughter. Boy's efforts can be studied through this passage:

He who taught her his concepts and theories [...] also tutored her about the expectations he had with regard to her pursuit of shade. And warned her against what he thought could become a dangerous concern for the 'underdog.' [...] He also implied that if she chose a darker husband, others would know that she was sexually impure and forced to make the best of it. [...] Boy taught his eldest daughter that she came from his people--white people, he stressed--and he expected Clare to preserve his green eyes and light skin--those things she had been born with. And she had a duty to turn the green eyes blue, once and for all--and the skin, now gold, become pale and subject to visible sunburn. These things she should pursue. (127)

Boy's elaborate conceptions about race and color are expressed very accurately in this passage. Through the above 'lecture,' Boy tries to infuse into his daughter's mind and heart xenophobic attitudes towards what he considers the "impure" black Other. The verbs "tutored," "taught," "implied," "warned," and "stressed" confirm Boy's great expectations regarding his daughter's "pursuit" of a white "shade." Boy's warning of his daughter against what he literally calls the "dangerous," "the underdog," and the "impure" is indicative of an intolerant racism according to which "[h]uman beings are not seen, at first, as people, but as races" (Deena 11).

Boy's reminder to Clare that "she came from his people--white people" and that her "duty" is "to preserve his green eyes and light skin--those things she had been born with" (*Abeng* 127) is full of suggestions. Boy's statement not only accentuates his obsession with race and color, but also confirms his determination to annihilate his daughter's black identity. Boy's insistence that his daughter "should pursue" markers of whiteness stems from his firm belief that blackness is a threat to his daughter's present and future, for it tells about her descent from degenerate African ancestors.

Victim to a historical superiority complex, Boy indefatigably teaches his daughter that any association with blacks will lead to her inferiority and degeneration. Keeping Clare alert to her fragile identity, Boy constantly "tutors" her about the blessings of whiteness and the curses of blackness. Thus, blackness is synonymous with risks ("dangerous"), inferiority ("underdog"), and promiscuity ("sexually impure"). Elsewhere in the story, Boy warns his daughter that "[o]n this little island so far removed from the mother country, a white girl could so easily become trash" (149). Boy takes his daughter's whiteness for granted as he purports to erase her black affiliations and Jamaican roots, identity markers Clare can neither overlook nor give up altogether.

We also remark the way Boy amplifies his daughter's whiteness by calling her solely a "white girl," with powerful bonds to a highly esteemed "mother country." This "mother country" gains more in value when juxtaposed to this "little island" (Jamaica), where Clare "could so easily become trash." The adjective "little" here is pejorative, for it explicitly points to the island's insignificance in comparison with a protective "mother country" as can be inferred from the word "mother." In a like vein,

the word "trash" is another derogatory allusion to the island's worthlessness and the many risks it represents for Clare's identity formation. The following father-daughter dialogue describes Boy's relentless efforts to erase Clare's black identity and sever her ties with blackness in general.

'Then how come you say I'm white?' [Clare]

'What the hell has that got to do with anything?

You're white because you're a Savage.' [Boy]

'But Mother is colored. Isn't she?' [Clare]

'Yes.' [Boy]

'If she is colored and you are white, doesn't that make me colored?' [Clare]

'No. You are my daughter. You're white.' [Boy] (73)

This conversation shows how Clare strives to reach "an explanation of her own life" and identity (72). The dialogue also raises the problem of Clare's wrestling with the two sides of her hybrid self. We particularly notice the abundance of a color-related diction; indeed, the word "white" is reiterated four times, whereas its counterpart "colored" appears twice in the dialogue. This accumulation of color signifiers bespeaks the centrality of color in determining Clare's identity structure, as well as the complexity of her racial definition: being both "white" and "colored." Such a complexity is underscored by the series of questions Clare adamantly asks her father. Quite curiously, Clare's share of the conversation consists of interrogations only, an allusion to the extreme confusion disrupting her self-knowledge and identity claiming. We also notice that the three questions Clare asks turn around the same perplexity: "Then how come you say I'm white?" In other words, Clare's questions to her father accentuate the same complexity, namely her racial duality and hybrid descent from mixed parentage and history.

This 'heated' father-daughter verbal confrontation captures Clare's struggle to shield the blackness she inherits from her "colored" mother. Clare's embracing of this "colored" identity is indicated by her assertion of her mother's irrefutable blackness, a fact Clare mentions twice in the dialogue: "But Mother is colored. Isn't she?" and "If she is colored." Clare's reiteration of, and clinging to, her mother's blackness is meant to counter her father's hammering on a white identity she cannot fully embrace. Clare's attachment to the "colored" side of her identity also opposes her father's prejudiced assumptions about color and roots. These racist assumptions are

obstacles to Clare's claiming of an "identity (her black heritage) she has been taught to despise by her father" and "the colonial educational system" of colonial Jamaica (Berrian 210).

Clare is, thus, conscious of her equal belonging to two ethnicities: the whiteness she inherits from her father and the darkness given to her by her mother. In opposition to her father's stubborn hope to fully assert her whiteness ("No. You are my daughter. You're white"), Clare embraces the two shades of her identity: one "white" and the other "colored." Boy's disappointment is signalled by his angry rejoinder: "What the hell has that got to do with anything?" Boy also abruptly ends the conversation lest more interrogations would lead to further challenges and complications.

Boy's racist views about blacks and the "hierarchy of shades" he keenly tries to engrave into Clare's mind have roots in his white-centered upbringing and heritage. Boy's repulsion from black Jamaicans stems from a "paranoia passed down through [his] family" and "a logical distrust of anyone not like them" (*Abeng* 29). The words "paranoia" and "distrust" are indicative of a manifest superiority complex of which Boy is certainly victim, echoing Fanon's view that the "white man [is] enslaved by his superiority" (60).

Abeng draws a Jamaican colonial society torn apart by unbridgeable shades of whiteness and blackness. In this society, shades of color have more social, cultural, historical, and psychological consequences than what surface color indicates. In *The Land of Look Behind*, Cliff foregrounds the "rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification" (14) of her Jamaican society. The following passage from *Abeng* sheds further light on the sharp racial divisions marking the world Clare inhabits:

Light and dark were made much of in that school [which Clare attends]. It was really nothing new in Jamaica--but, as in the rest of the society, it was concealed behind euphemisms of talent, looks, aptitude. Just as Kitty had called Clare's teachers 'ladies' when she knew full well that they were damned narrow-minded racists as she told herself. [...] Color was diffuse and hard to track at St. Catherine's. [...] The shadows of color permeated the relationships of the students, one to one. (100)

The above passage illustrates how Clare's schoolmates are 'prisoners', so to speak, of the antagonistic racial worlds and color categories

permeating their society. The passage articulates the divisions of Clare's school community (made up of "light" and "dark" "students" and white "teachers") along "diffuse" racial types and "shadows of color." Despite the white teachers' attempts to conceal their "damned narrow-minded" racism, the entrenched color divisions pervading Clare's school cannot be denied. It is also relevant to note the effect created by the word "permeated;" this verb suggests that none of the students is 'immune' from the dangerous implications of their colors.

The school Clare attends is but a microcosm for the racially divided Jamaican society portrayed in *Abeng*. Within both spaces (school and society), color determines people's attitudes towards, and relationships with, each other. These attitudes and relationships are not determined by worth and achievement ("talent" and "aptitude"), but rather by superficial "looks" and "shadows of color." Centuries after slavery was abolished, and as Jamaica moves towards its independence, Clare's community is still blindly ruled by the same racist stigmas which had underpinned slave-master relationships, plantation politics, and colonial encounters. Hence, we notice the significance of the sentence: "It was really nothing new in Jamaica." This suggests that Clare's present identity complexity has deeper historical roots, which Clare can neither undo nor account for. Clare's enigmatic identity was dictated centuries before she was born, hence her inability to even understand what exactly lies behind her present life and identity. Clare's complex identity has more to it than the surface admixture of shades, and can only be deciphered, so to speak, if the distant and silenced hi/stories she descends from are un/covers.

Conclusion

Clare's arduous journey into self-knowledge and identity assertion is impeded by countless complexities and enigmas. Clare's mulatto identity is shaped by conflicting historical, social, psychological, and racial factors that Clare hardly comprehends and pieces together. If ever there is a finding here, it is that certain tragedies can antedate one's birth-date by centuries. Indeed, Clare is a real prisoner, so to speak, of the irreconcilable familial hi/stories that make her hybrid self in the contentious context of colonial Jamaica. The profound identity dilemma Clare faces had been dictated centuries before she was born by the disastrous history of slave-master rapports, with their traumatic sexual

exploitation, rape, and black female nullification, hence the “neurosis” and “schizophrenia” often operative within the modern mulatto’s consciousness and structure of feeling (Adisa 207, 209).

As *Abeng* moves towards its closure, none of the questions Clare has painfully struggled with is answered or accounted for. On the contrary, Clare’s racist father strives to further distance his daughter from her Afro-Caribbean roots by asserting the “irresponsibility he felt imbued those [Jamaican] people” (149), and that “no matter what you do with them, they’ll never be like us” (131). Boy ultimately sends Clare to stay with Miss Beatrice, a racist relative of Boy who adamantly teaches Clare the many perils of blackness and the need to put behind the African side of her selfhood. According to Miss Beatrice, “God meant that coons [blacks] and buckra [white] people were not to mix their blood. It’s not right. Only sadness comes from this mixture” (164).

Clare’s resistance to the lures of whiteness and her turning down of the privileges of Euro-centrism gather more momentum in *Abeng*’s sequel, *No Telephone to Heaven*. In this novel, Clare decidedly distances herself from her father’s fixed views about the constraints of color, which he endeavours to inculcate in her. Clare moves towards liberating herself from the racist myths of purity and impurity, which “attempted to divide race from race and to put whites at the centre” (Bost 683).

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مفارقات الهوية في رواية "إبينغ" (١٩٨٤) للكاتبة ميشيل كليف^(*)

عبيد العربي العبيدي

أستاذ مساعد الأدب الإنجليزي، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها،

كلية الآداب، جامعة الملك سعود، الرياض

(قدم للنشر في ٢٣/١٢/١٤٣٦هـ؛ وقبل في ١١/٤/١٤٣٧هـ)

الكلمات المفتاحية: ميشيل كليف، "إبينغ"، الهوية الهجينة، بحر الكاريبي، التاريخ..
ملخص البحث: تنطلق هذه الورقة من قراءة تحليلية لرواية "إبينغ" (١٩٨٤) للكاتبة الجامايكية ذات الأصول الأفريقية "ميشيل كليف". وتتناول الورقة بالأساس دراسة نموذج أو جانب من الهوية المعقدة لشعب البحر الكاريبي على وجه التحديد، أتناول بالدرس والتحليل الإشكاليات النفسية والعرقية والتاريخية، والاجتماعية التي تجابهها المرأة أو الفتاة صاحبة الهوية الهجينة (المعروفة أيضا بالهوية الخلاسية)، في المجتمع الجامايكي المستعمر في خمسينات القرن الماضي. في هذا الإطار التاريخي الدقيق، كان وجود شخصية الأنثى الهجينة يعيد إلى الأذهان ذكريات مؤلمة من الاستغلال الجنسي، والاعتصاب، والإقصاء على أساس اللون والعرق وغيرها من أشكال العدوان، التي كانت النساء السود ضحية لها خلال ثلاثة قرون من العبودية والاستعمار الأوروبي في منطقة البحر الكاريبي. أسعى كذلك إلى فهم وتحليل الأسباب الكامنة وراء الرفض والإقصاء، الذي غالبا ما تتعرض لها المرأة أو الفتاة الهجينة كلما حاولت تأكيد هويتها وإثبات ذاتها في المجتمع الذي هي جزء منه في الأصل. أبدأ هذه الدراسة بإبراز أن الهوية الهجينة المعقدة وغير المستقرة التي رافقت شخصية البطلة في رواية "إبينغ" هي في الواقع، جزء لا يتجزأ من التعقيدات العميقة التي طبعت هوية وتاريخ ونفسية شعب البحر الكاريبي (ذو الأصول الأفريقية)، لمدة قرون كاملة كان خلالها يعاني مختلف أشكال الظلم والاعتداء والاستغلال والتهميش تحت نظامي العبودية والاستعمار.

(*) يتقدم كاتب هذه الدراسة بالشكر والتقدير والامتنان لمركز البحوث في كلية الآداب بجامعة الملك سعود لتمويل هذا البحث.