



Racial Perception in *Me and White Supremacy* and *When They Call You a Terrorist, A Black Lives Matter Memoir*

Gitonga James^{1*}, Antony Mukasa Mate²

¹M.A. Student, Department of Humanities, Chuka University, Kenya

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Humanities, Chuka University, Kenya

Abstract—African American literature has been greatly shaped by racial themes, hence understanding the experiences of people of colour is essential for grasping the current situation in the United States. Memoirs like *When They Call You a Terrorist; A Black Lives Matter Memoir* and *Me and White Supremacy* are important for exploring identity and offering new insights into race relations and cultural conflicts. This paper looks at how racial perceptions are depicted in *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla F. Saad, and *When They Call You a Terrorist; A Black Lives Matter Memoir* by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele. The main argument is that people of colour often face racial marginalization, leading to their identities being appropriated by more powerful social groups. This study uses the idea of orientalism from postcolonial theory to explore the challenges of racial ambivalence. It argues that in the context of racial conflict, cultural stereotypes often fuel both discrimination and oppression.

Index Terms—People of colour, Memoir, Hegemony, Subjugation, Predicaments, Ambivalence.

1. Introduction

The problems faced by racial minorities in America are closely tied to the history of slavery, which continued even after the Civil War (Galtung, 1990; Paik & Walberg, 2007). In a society where racial power is strong, Cullors & Bandele explain how people of colour are often called "terrorists" by white people, leading to continued discrimination. In *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, the authors show how white individuals assert their perceived superiority by portraying people of colour as both inferior and threatening. This marginalization reflects Said's (1978) concept of "othering," which examines how dominant groups mistreat marginalized ones. The Memoir offers a powerful and emotional look at what it's like to be a Black woman in America and at starting a justice movement in a country that says it values freedom. The authors point out that black people are some of the most vulnerable in the United States. In *Me and White Supremacy*, Layla F. Saad discusses about white supremacy and how it affects people of colour. As a Black Muslim woman, she notes that white fragility is a frequent problem and shows that white supremacy is a racist belief that wrongly claims white people are better and should have power

over other races.

2. I Can't Breathe: Racial Stereotypes

Stereotyping involves the portrayal and judgment of individuals based on fixed and rigid characteristics assigned to their group (Pickering, 2015). Stereotypes have played a significant role throughout American history, notably affecting African American men, who have often been the most conspicuously stereotyped (Harpalani, 2017). The evolution of these depictions of people of colour can be attributed to both scientific racism and legal precedents. A notable example is the 1857 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, where Chief Justice Roger B. Taney denied the legal recognition of African Americans as citizens.

It is crucial to recognize that racial stereotypes, including figures such as the Mammy, Mandingo, Sapphire, Uncle Tom, and the Watermelon, have been shaped by specific historical and social contexts. The stereotype of the Mammy, depicted as overweight, self-sacrificing, and dependent, emerged in American cinema, with films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Imitation of Life* (1934), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) reinforcing this image. Saad begins Day 12 of her book with a quote from Hayder's debut song *Barbarians*:

We them barbarians
Beautiful and scaring them Earth shakin' rattling
Be wild out loud again
(Mona Hayder)

Hayder thoughtfully through music, explores the problem of labeling and stereotyping, often employing sarcasm and satire to illustrate how people of colour may, without meaning to, trigger fear in white individuals, likely because of their skin tone. despite this, she also highlights the undeniable beauty inherent in people of colour. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that people of colour possess inherent beauty. Saad contends that 'the persistent reinforcement of racist stereotypes through media and societal views allows white supremacy to cast non-white individuals as "the other"—subjects to be feared, mocked,

*Corresponding author: gatojimtoosh@gmail.com

marginalized, and criminalized (p.95). Furthermore, the impact of such stereotypes on the African American experience is significant.

Ruppert (1995) notes that stereotyping occurs when certain traits are attributed to individuals based on the belief that most or all members of their group share those characteristics (p. 82). Building on this idea, Saad explores racial prejudice from a philosophical standpoint, suggesting that anyone, regardless of race, can have biases. However, she emphasizes that 'racism emerges when these biases are combined with power, allowing the dominant racial group—those who benefit from white privilege—to exert control and cause harm' (p.96). Saad also draws attention to the crucial difference between the self and others:

Therefore, though people of colour can hold prejudice against a white person, they cannot be racist towards a white person. They do not have the power (which comes with white privileges) and the backing of a system of oppression (called white supremacy) to be able to turn that prejudice into domination and punishment in a way that a white person would be able to if the tables were reversed. (p.96).

This paper argues that there is a one-sided dynamic where white individuals can hold prejudice against people of colour, but the reverse is not the same. This imbalance stems from the fact that white privilege empowers the self, while people of colour do not have a comparable system of power like 'black privilege.' In the same vein, Cullors & Bandele point out racial marginalization by contrasting the economically disadvantaged Van Nuys neighborhood with the wealthier, predominantly white community of Sherman Oaks. It is reported:

It was the 1990s and what was mostly said in carefully chosen language was that being born black or Mexican was enough to label you a gang member, a dangerous drug-involved criminal. and there were few leaders, save for perhaps Maxine waters, saying that it was all bullshit. A group of kids hanging out in the street-because there were no parks and rec, no programming, nothing except sidewalks and alleyways to hang out in became a gang. And it was mostly boys rounded up in those years. Boys, the initial wide swath of collateral damage in the war on gangs, the war on drugs, both of these name's code for 'round' up all the niggers you can' (p. 47).

Cullors & Bandele discuss how, in a society where whiteness dominates, the idea of "otherness" plays a significant role in marginalizing people of colour. They point out that the American police force functions as a tool of oppression, contributing to the subjugation of these marginalized communities. This idea fits with Conrad's description of "otherness" in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, where the character Wait is described in cruel words like "black fraud" (p. 25), "bloody black beast" (p. 42), and "black phantom" (p. 93). Through these descriptions, Conrad points out how racial and historical views shape the narrative, showing Wait as a symbol of both racial and basic darkness.

3. Racial Centering

An analysis of *Me and White Supremacy* and *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* reveals the

critical role that white centering plays in perpetuating racial bias. The summer of 2020, a period marked by a nationwide reckoning on race in the United States, brought the concept of white centering into sharp focus, following the violent deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of law enforcement. Consequently, this study defines white centering as "racial centering"—a common societal practice that places whiteness at the forefront, to the detriment of people of colour. Cullors & Bandele recount:

There was a petition that was drafted and circulated all the way to the white house. It said we were terrorists. We who in response to the killing of that child,17-year-old boy shot carrying skittles and iced tea, said black lives matter. The document gained traction during the first week of protests against the back-to-back police killings of Alton sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando castle in Minneapolis. At the end of that week, on July 7, in Dallas, Texas a sniper opened fire during a Black Lives Matter protest that was populated with Mothers and Fathers who brought their children along to proclaim, 'we have the right to live' (p.13).

The quotation highlights deep-seated racial bias, as evidenced by the 'petition circulated' which marginalizes people of colour within racial discourse. It is notable that when people of colour raise their concerns, they are often branded as terrorists. Smith (1893) describes the perception of a 'bad negro' as 'the most horrible creature upon the earth, the most brutal and merciless' (p. 181). Cullors asserts that, like many participants in the Black Lives Matter movement, she has experienced both poverty and police brutality, emphasizing that 'the neighborhood where I lived and loved, and the neighborhood where many members of Black Lives Matter lived and loved, were designated war zones, and the enemy was us' (p. 4). Hooks (1992) expands on this discussion, noting that theorizing the Black experience in America presents significant challenges. She further argues:

Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass Media, many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection. Even those of us righteously committed to black liberation struggle, who feel we have decolonized our minds, often find it hard to 'speak' our experience. (p.2).

Hooks, sharing similar experiences as Cullors & Bandele, describes how people of colour perceive white supremacy as a system that upholds colonial ideologies and cultural dehumanization. This viewpoint echoes Francis (2002), who points out that white individuals often see themselves as mere individuals, "just people," as part of the broader human race, which is a privilege not afforded to everyone. Most of us are clear, however, that people whose skin is not white are seen as members of a distinct race. The surprising thing is that, despite not viewing ourselves as part of a racial group, people of color often perceive us that way" (p.1).

Noble (2022) takes issue with how Black people have been depicted as "ugly," pointing out that this image stems from minstrelsy, where exaggerated facial features were used to portray Black individuals as foolish and less than human,

turning them into objects of ridicule (p. 10). Kirton (2010) adds to this by discussing Halstead's (1984) thought about types of racism. One type, called "pre-reflective gut" racism, is when people have a deep dislike for other people. This kind of racism often leads to control and hostility. (p. 56). Lessing (1966) shows an example of this type of racism through Mary Turner's intense hatred of Black characters, a hatred shaped by the wider racist attitudes of white society. In Lessing's narrative, when the old settlers say, "one has to understand the country," it subtly implies, "you need to accept our views on the natives" (p. 20).

Kirton's analysis reflects the disdainful attitudes toward Black individuals, akin to how people of colour are labeled as terrorists. Lessing (1978) illustrates cultural racism by portraying Black characters as oppressed due to their unfamiliarity with the dominant culture, reducing them to mere labourers on white-owned properties. This idea explains why Cullors's brother and his friends didn't complain or resist when the police in Van Nuys stopped them, searched them, and made them lift their shirts. As Cullors & Bandele put it, "They will not cry or cuss... they will not say they do not deserve such treatment because by the time they hit puberty, neither will my brother have expected that things could be another way" (Cullors & Bandele, p. 19). This example of unfair treatment connects with Foucault's (1988) ideas about how power works between people. Foucault avers:

Relations of power are not in themselves forms of repression but what happens is that in society, in most societies, organizations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those relations in a state of symmetry, so that a certain number of persons get an advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally that's what one calls power relation that has been institutionalized, frozen, immobilized, to the profit of some and to the detriment of others. (p.410).

For people of colour, being treated badly and unfairly has become so common that it's often just seen as normal. Take Monte, for example. He faces rubber bullets, tasers, and is then moved to Twin Towers, a high-security prison where he's labeled as a threat to the police. Cullors describes how Monte is "stripped, beaten, and starved, kicked and humiliated by guards... they get to call him the threat. They get to call him the harm. They get to charge him with terrorism" (p. 90). This shows just how deep the problem of institutionalized oppression goes. Systemic racism like this has made it hard for people to get equal chances in education, jobs, and housing, and it deeply affects the criminal justice system. Elias & Feagin (2016) posit that "institutionalized racism, similar to systemic and structural racism, is the most extreme form of a system's

problems" (p. 7).

4. Conclusion

As it has been demonstrated, Saad and Cullors & Bandele challenge the term "terrorism" used by a white supremacist framework. The Memoirists illustrates how racial bias is based on long-held stereotypes. Additionally, the study offers explanations on how white supremacy fosters complicated race relations, where the dominant white system has built-in advantages. Unlike this system, people of colour do not have a comparable system of 'black supremacy.' Consequently, the racial perception among people of colour often frames their experience in terms of self-versus other, colonizer versus colonized, black versus white, and dominant versus marginalized.

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