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# BLACK WOMAN'S VOICE TO BE DUET: SUFFERING AND RESISTANCE OF DOUBLE MINORITY IN DJANET SEARS' HARLEM DUET

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Djanet Sears' Harlem Duet**

**Synopsis:**

This paper firstly focuses in "Harlem Duet," the adaptation of Shakespeare's "Othello," on that Othello, a black man's desire for white recognition excludes black women both racially and sexually. "Secondly, this paper argues that the female protagonist's failure of resistance shows the racial boundary shaped by white has been enrooted within black people's lives.

Black Woman's Voice to Be Duet: Suffering and Resistance of Double Minority in Djanet  
Sears' *Harlem Duet*

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Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* (1997) sheds light on the twofold oppression of Black women who belong to both sexual and racial minority, and prescribes an alternative to free them from such a double bondage. Both by postcolonial and feminism discourses, Black women have been deprived of their voices. Thus, *Harlem Duet* is Sears' compensation for it, and its form of rewriting Shakespeare's *Othello* is appropriate for this intention. In "An interview" with Mat Buntin, Sears advises a student working on Shakespearean adaptation to "find the story that is not being told by Shakespeare but he (the student) can see or feel." According to this, Sears finds behind *Othello* not only Othello's obsession with whitewashing himself, but also its hurt on his erased counterpart, Black female. Based on this rumination, this paper firstly examines how double othering operates on Black female, especially how Othello's equation of whiteness with masculinity sets gender and racial hierarchy between him and Billie. Secondly, this paper focuses on Billie's poisoning as a mode of resistance in order to demonstrate that the concept of race is pathological enough for Black woman to threaten restoring her identity within bond to African tradition. Finally, this paper examines if Sears's emphasis on the harmony between Black male and female for overcoming racial oppression is convincing and viable as well in the context of the white mainstream society.

In the play, Sears describes Othello as the one who is anxious to be acknowledged by white mainstream society, which leads to racial and sexual oppression to Black female. His desperation is the result of internalizing the ancient but powerful Imperialists' notion that

masculine west and feminine orient. They feel themselves as deprived of patriarchal role and thus castrated by White colonizers. Othello also claims that Black women consider him as “poor fathers, poor partners” and his status as husband is less worthy than their career (70), while White male seems the ideal patriarch with dominance on economic and political realm which has been considered as men’s territory. This inferiority complex has devastating effect of on Black male’s psyche, in that it leads to their self-alienation. In Act One, scene seven, Billie criticizes this tendency as “disease,” which suggests that Black male’s desire for White’s recognition is pathological. Frantz Fanon insists in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) that the only way to whitewash is sexual relationship with White women, because only White men can penetrate White women. This is why Othello dejects Billie and chooses Mona.

Black male’s equation of whiteness and masculinity builds the racial and gender hierarchy between them and Black female, and finally leads to ignorance of their pain. Black feminists point out that from the slavery age, Black female slaves had to work endlessly like a mule but were isolated from their labor. It is because Black male slaves’ rejection to do work which they consider womanly even in the field, so female slaves had to cover all those labor in addition to household chores. For this work was for White masters, they were alienated from their own labor. The repetition of their pain is found in Billie’s protest to Othello that her mother’s death paid Othello’s tuition, not hers. Furthermore, Billie argues that Black women confront racial oppression more severely because they are considered as blackness itself not only by White people, but also by Black male. As the counterpart to masculine west, Othello effeminates Africa: for him, Africa is “mother Africa” (73) where father is absent so he has to escape from it for building his masculinity. Thus, in deserting Billie, Othello shifts his blackness to her and tries to eradicate it, while Billie “[does not] have that luxury” (56). This explains Othello’s ignorance of Black women’s suffering, which

suggests that Black female voice has been disregarded even by their own men.

Considering this, Billie's revenge on Othello with Egyptian poison represents Black women's punishment and resistance throughout history against the intersection of racism and sexism, because the poison functions as racially other woman's weapon to challenge absolute otherness. The significance of Billie's poison is so notable that the table with Billie's poison-making instruments attracts audiences from the first scene in Act One. Western tradition links poison to penetration, blur of boundary, and thus pollution of white pure blood through miscegenation. Hence, female poisoners come to symbolize subversive women against racism and sexism and Billie's obsession with Egyptian chemicals identifies herself as challenger inherited from her own culture. Based on this perception, Billie's poison can pollute Othello's whitened body, as Othello whitewashes himself through penetrating Mona. Another material which functions as historical repository of whole African women's suffering is the handkerchief. In Act One, scene ten, Billie reveals that the handkerchief has been inherited from Othello's ancestors with their torment since the slavery age: whole African history of persecution is accumulated here as "an heirloom" (75). Therefore, Billie's poisoned handkerchief deputizes whole African women's sorrow and revenge.

Nevertheless, Billie's poisoning has a limitation, through which Sears gives answer to Billie's question "what hundreds of years of slavery did to the African American psyche" (103): since the border between Black and White has been enrooted for a so long time in their consciousness that even the challenge to it can end up in destructing themselves. The result of Billie's revenge is uncertain, considering that the effect of the poison on Othello and Mona is not described; rather, it is Billie who is mentally destructed. This imperfectness implies that Billie's obsession with anti-White sentiment rather solidifies the boundary between races, which has a danger of repeating the concept of otherness, and thus exacerbates self-alienation.

In other words, it becomes another solo, not the *duet*. As a result, for counteraction to her growing enmity against White, Billie's try to identify herself with foremothers degenerates to the obsession and finally fails to establish her identity out of the shadow through internalizing the history of Black women. In Act II scene seven, Billie's addressing herself 'Sybil,' which is named from her grandmother, signifies that she assimilates herself to her ancestors, and thus writes their whole experience onto her body. However, at the same time, it is when she accepts the name 'Sibyl,' that Billie reveals her insanity. Her declaration that "Trapped in history" (101) suggests she is stuck in the history of African women and incapable of developing identity from it against the one given by White.

Overcome by the solid border between races, Billie is not only trapped in history, but also it is impossible for her to be an agent who continues the history of her people. This is suggested through Billie's failure in communicating with Jenny, her niece. Considering that Jenny is a descendant of Billie's generation and has a healthy relationship with her father which Billie is lack of, she symbolizes potential of bright future of present Black generation. However, though Jenny tries to contact Billie, Billie is afraid of exposing her breakdown to Jenny and keeps delaying meeting her. Their interaction is just indirect, and when Billie tries to talk directly to Jenny the first and the last, Billie is already mad. As a result, Jenny actually never appears on the stage throughout the play and Billie never succeeds in communicating with her. Thus, "A history trapped in [Billie]" (101). Fanon argues that "Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood" (106). Considering this, her try to establish identity is imperfect because though she fails to pass it to her descendant. In other words, the solid interracial border inside her prevents her from overcoming the past to the future. As a result of the failure in resistance and building identity, what she only can choose is insanity.

With Billie's failure in building identity, the ending which Billie's reunion with Canada, her father, is ambivalent solution to her suffering as double minority. On the one hand, since Canada has been historically known as a place of hope for African slaves who escaped from America, their reunion suggests the possibility of Billie's redemption. However, it is still doubtful that the harmony between Black male and female for overcoming racial oppression is valid in white mainstream society. Because the idea of White and Black race which was shaped by White people has been so powerful and pervasive, it is hard to root out the racial discourse from African characters' lives. On the other hand, considering that Canada is a male who firstly left her, her return to him can presents the possibility of the duet between male and female postcolonial discourse. However, at the same time, the fact that Canada is male shows difficulty of Black women to acquire their voice on their own. It seems that Othello is merely replaced with Canada, whose place must be anyway occupied by a man for helping Billie to build her identity. Even Sears herself seems to be aware of this limit, which is found in her view on Canada as an African-Canadian: "[e]ven amidst the flaws and the criticisms I have of the country [Canada], it's the place where I choose to live;..." (Buntin, *An Interview*). Nevertheless, this kind of dystopian and ambivalent ending is appropriate for presenting African descendants' lives devastated by race and sex, which Sears intends to explore through this play (*Notes* 14). This is why Billie and Canada's duet in the end of the book is still not heard clearly, "more hummed than sung" (117), and therefore, the Black woman's voice to be a duet, which means two singers sing equally and harmonize, echoes desperately throughout the play.

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