



Fractured Mirrors: Lacanian Readings of Identity, Language, and Trauma in *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*

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Abstract-- Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* presents a profoundly fragmented exploration of female subjectivity shaped by race, gender, memory, and trauma. Employing a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, this paper examines how fractured identity, unstable language, and unresolved trauma structure the protagonist Clara's psychic life. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order, lack, and the Real, the study argues that Kennedy dramatizes identity as perpetually deferred and divided—produced through misrecognition and sustained by desire rather than coherence. Clara's identification with white cinematic icons functions as a distorted mirror that promises wholeness yet intensifies alienation, revealing the racial exclusions embedded within dominant cultural representations. The play's non-linear structure, repetitive dialogue, and temporal collapse further foreground the failure of language to fully articulate black female experience, situating trauma as an unsymbolizable force that returns through psychic rupture rather than narrative resolution. Moreover, Kennedy's experimental dramaturgy challenges Eurocentric psychoanalytic universals by demonstrating how fragmentation, though theorized as universal in Lacanian thought, is materially intensified and racialized for Black women whose access to symbolic recognition is structurally denied. Clara's psychic distress is inseparable from lived realities of marriage, motherhood, economic precarity, and historical inheritance, revealing "lack" as socially and culturally produced rather than merely linguistic. By refusing narrative closure, the play redefines fragmentation not as pathology but as an ethical and resistant mode of articulating Black female consciousness within intersecting systems of racial and patriarchal power.

Keywords-- Adrienne Kennedy, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, Black Female Identity, Experimental Dramaturgy, Feminist Psychoanalytic Criticism, Fragmented Subjectivity, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Mirror Stage, Racialized Representation, Symbolic Order, Trauma and Memory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Kennedy occupies a singular position in modern American drama for her radical rejection of realism and her sustained interrogation of identity through fragmented theatrical form. Her plays dismantle linear narrative, unified character, and psychological closure, replacing them with dream logic, repetition, and psychic dislocation.

A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White (1976) exemplifies this aesthetic, offering an intense portrayal of Black female subjectivity fractured by race, gender, memory, and historical inheritance. Centered on Clara, a Black woman writer and mother, the play stages an interior world where lived reality collides with cinematic fantasy, personal memory, and cultural myth. This paper argues that Kennedy's dramaturgy can be productively read through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's theories of the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order, lack, and the Real, the study demonstrates how the play dramatizes identity as perpetually divided and deferred. Clara's psyche is shaped not by coherence but by misrecognition, linguistic instability, and unresolved trauma, revealing the impossibility of a unified Black female self within dominant ideological structures.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LACAN AND THE DIVIDED SUBJECT

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory challenges humanist notions of a stable, autonomous self. According to Lacan, subjectivity is constituted through lack and division rather than completeness. The Mirror Stage marks the moment when the subject identifies with an external image, producing an illusory sense of wholeness that masks internal fragmentation. This misrecognition inaugurates the split between the imagined self and lived experience. Equally significant is the Symbolic Order, the realm of language, law, and social norms into which the subject enters. While language makes identity intelligible, it also alienates the subject, as desire can never be fully articulated. Beyond the Symbolic lies the Real—that which resists symbolization and returns as trauma, repetition, or psychic rupture. Kennedy's theatre mirrors this Lacanian structure: her characters exist not as unified beings but as divided subjects whose identities remain unstable and incomplete.

III. CINEMATIC FANTASY AND THE RACIALIZED MIRROR

One of the most striking features of *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* is Clara's identification with white Hollywood actresses, particularly figures associated with emotional intensity and artistic freedom.



From a Lacanian perspective, these cinematic figures function as imaginary mirrors—idealized images with which Clara seeks identification. However, this identification is fundamentally alienating. The mirror offered by Hollywood is racially exclusive; it reflects a version of subjectivity inaccessible to Clara as a Black woman. Rather than producing coherence, the cinematic mirror intensifies psychic fragmentation. Clara's desire to inhabit these roles reveals not empowerment but absence, underscoring how dominant cultural imagery denies Black women affirming representations of selfhood. Kennedy thus exposes the racial limits of the Mirror Stage itself, suggesting that Black female subjects encounter distorted or unavailable mirrors within Western visual culture.

IV. LANGUAGE, FRAGMENTATION, AND THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

Language in Kennedy's play is unstable and discontinuous. Dialogue is marked by repetition, interruption, and emotional excess, while scenes collapse into one another without clear transitions. This linguistic fragmentation reflects Clara's troubled relationship with the Symbolic Order. In Lacanian theory, language structures identity, but Kennedy dramatizes its failure to fully articulate Black female experience. Clara's pain cannot be contained within conventional discourse; her speech circles trauma without resolving it. The breakdown of narrative coherence signals the inadequacy of dominant linguistic systems to represent intersecting racial and gendered realities. Kennedy's refusal of linear storytelling thus becomes a critique of the Symbolic Order itself—revealing how language participates in the erasure and silencing of Black women's psychic lives.

V. TRAUMA AND THE RETURN OF THE REAL

Trauma in *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* is not presented as a singular past event but as a persistent condition that shapes Clara's consciousness. The play's recursive structure—its repetition of scenes, memories, and emotional states—mirrors what Lacan identifies as the return of the Real. The Real erupts where symbolization fails. Clara's trauma resurfaces through psychic dislocation rather than narrative explanation, resisting closure or catharsis. Historical memory, personal loss, and cultural violence intrude upon the present, collapsing temporal boundaries and destabilizing identity. Kennedy's depiction of trauma rejects therapeutic resolution, insisting instead on its ongoing, structural nature within systems of racial and patriarchal oppression.

VI. GENDER, LACK, AND MATERIAL CONDITIONS

While Lacan conceptualizes lack as a universal condition of subjectivity, Kennedy complicates this abstraction by grounding lack in material realities. Clara's experience of absence is inseparable from lived conditions—marriage, motherhood, economic precarity, and restricted artistic autonomy. These constraints reveal how gendered and racialized expectations shape psychic life. Clara's lack is not merely linguistic or symbolic but socially produced. Kennedy exposes how the Symbolic Order enforces normative femininity, disciplining female desire and punishing deviation. Through Clara, the play critiques the gendered demands placed upon Black women, revealing how psychic fragmentation emerges from lived structural inequalities.

VII. CHALLENGING EUROCENTRIC PSYCHOANALYTIC UNIVERSALS

Kennedy's play also functions as an implicit critique of Eurocentric psychoanalytic universals. While Lacanian theory posits fragmentation as a universal condition, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* demonstrates how fragmentation is intensified for subjects historically excluded from symbolic recognition. Clara's divided psyche reflects not only universal lack but also racialized exclusion. Her inability to achieve coherence exposes the limits of psychoanalytic models that fail to account for race, history, and material oppression. Kennedy's dramaturgy thus extends Lacanian theory by situating psychic division within specific socio-historical contexts.

VIII. FRAGMENTATION AS RESISTANCE

Importantly, Kennedy does not portray fragmentation as psychological failure. Instead, the refusal of unity becomes an ethical and political strategy. By denying narrative closure and coherent identity, the play resists ideological demands for wholeness that obscure lived contradictions. Fragmentation allows Kennedy to articulate a truth that realism cannot: that Black female subjectivity under intersecting systems of power is necessarily unstable, contested, and unfinished. The fractured form of the play mirrors the fractured reality it seeks to represent.

IX. PERFORMANCE, EMBODIMENT, AND THE FRAGMENTED STAGE

Beyond textual and psychoanalytic analysis, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* gains further complexity when examined through performance and embodiment.



Adrienne Kennedy's theatre resists naturalistic staging and instead demands a performative mode that externalizes psychic rupture. The stage does not function as a mimetic space but as an extension of Clara's interior consciousness, where bodies, voices, and movements signify psychological states rather than realistic action. From a Lacanian perspective, the actor's body becomes a site where the split subject is visibly enacted. Clara's oscillation between domestic roles, artistic ambition, and cinematic fantasy requires rapid shifts in tone, posture, and vocal rhythm. These shifts disrupt the illusion of a unified character, embodying what Jacques Lacan identifies as the divided subject who can never coincide fully with herself. Performance thus becomes a material enactment of psychic fragmentation, making visible the internal disjunctions produced by race, gender, and desire. Lighting, sound, and spatial arrangement further intensify this fragmentation. Sudden transitions, overlapping scenes, and disrupted temporal flow prevent spectators from settling into interpretive comfort. The audience is placed in a position analogous to Clara's psychic state—disoriented, unsettled, and denied narrative mastery. In this way, Kennedy's dramaturgy implicates the audience in the experience of fragmentation, transforming spectatorship into an ethical encounter with fractured subjectivity.

X. INTERTEXTUALITY, REPETITION, AND SELF-REFLEXIVE IDENTITY

Kennedy's play is deeply intertextual, drawing upon cinema, personal history, and literary memory. These intertexts do not function as allusions that enrich a stable narrative but as recurring fragments that interrupt and destabilize it. Clara's repeated invocation of film roles and cinematic figures underscores the compulsive nature of her identification, aligning with Lacan's understanding of desire as repetitive and unresolved. This repetition is not nostalgic but symptomatic. Each return to cinematic fantasy reenacts Clara's confrontation with lack—what is desired but cannot be attained. The self becomes constituted through repetition rather than development, challenging conventional narratives of growth or self-realization. Kennedy thereby rejects teleological models of identity formation, emphasizing instead circularity and stasis. Moreover, the play's self-reflexivity—its awareness of performance, writing, and artistic creation—positions Clara as both subject and object of representation. She is simultaneously the one who desires to create and the one who is constrained by the very structures that shape representation. This doubling reflects Lacan's assertion that the subject is always spoken by language even as she attempts to speak through it.

Motherhood, Creativity, and Symbolic Constraint

One of the most underexplored yet crucial dimensions of the play is its treatment of motherhood. Clara's maternal role is not idealized but depicted as a site of psychic conflict. Motherhood functions as a powerful Symbolic demand, organizing Clara's identity according to norms of self-sacrifice, emotional labor, and containment. From a Lacanian-feminist perspective, motherhood in the play exemplifies how the Symbolic Order regulates female desire. Clara's creative impulses—her longing to write, imagine, and escape—are continually deferred by maternal responsibility. This deferral reinforces lack, transforming creativity into an unreachable ideal rather than a lived practice. Kennedy does not present this conflict as a personal failure but as a structural contradiction. The play exposes how Black women are often required to embody strength, care, and endurance at the expense of psychic and creative freedom. Clara's fragmentation thus emerges not from maternal inadequacy but from the impossibility of reconciling creativity with socially imposed roles.

Historical Memory and Transgenerational Trauma

Another significant extension of the Lacanian reading lies in the play's engagement with historical memory. Trauma in *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* is not confined to Clara's individual experiences but is embedded within a larger historical continuum. The intrusion of past events, figures, and emotional residues suggests what contemporary trauma theorists describe as transgenerational haunting. Within a Lacanian framework, this haunting can be understood as the persistence of the Real across generations. That which could not be symbolized in the past returns in the present as psychic disturbance. Clara inherits not only personal memory but also the unresolved traumas of racial history—slavery, segregation, and cultural exclusion—that remain structurally unacknowledged. Kennedy's refusal to historicize trauma in linear or explanatory terms resists narratives of progress or closure. Instead, history is experienced as an ongoing psychic presence, collapsing temporal distinctions and reinforcing fragmentation. This approach aligns Kennedy's work with Black feminist and postcolonial critiques that view trauma as systemic rather than episodic.

Audience Reception and Ethical Discomfort

Kennedy's fractured dramaturgy also produces a distinctive mode of audience reception. The absence of clear narrative resolution and psychological explanation frustrates conventional expectations of meaning. Viewers are denied interpretive mastery, mirroring Clara's own lack of control over her psychic life. This discomfort is ethically significant.



Rather than offering empathy through identification with a coherent protagonist, Kennedy demands engagement with dissonance, opacity, and uncertainty. The audience is compelled to confront the limits of understanding when faced with subjectivities shaped by structural violence. From a Lacanian standpoint, this refusal of interpretive closure disrupts the spectator's desire for coherence. Just as Clara cannot achieve symbolic resolution, the audience cannot fully "understand" her experience within familiar frameworks. Kennedy thus transforms fragmentation into an ethical aesthetic that resists appropriation and simplification.

Extending Lacan: Kennedy's Intervention

While this paper employs Lacanian psychoanalysis as a critical lens, Kennedy's play ultimately exceeds and challenges psychoanalytic theory. Lacan theorizes lack as universal, but Kennedy demonstrates how lack is historically and materially intensified by race and gender. Her work exposes the blind spots of psychoanalysis when divorced from social context. In this sense, Kennedy does not merely illustrate Lacanian concepts; she revises them. By situating psychic fragmentation within lived realities of racial exclusion, economic precarity, and gendered constraint, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* demands a more intersectional psychoanalytic vocabulary. Kennedy's dramaturgy thus contributes to an expanded understanding of subjectivity—one that acknowledges the psychic consequences of systemic injustice and recognizes fragmentation as both condition and critique.

Positioning the Play within Contemporary Scholarship

This extended reading positions *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* as a foundational text for interdisciplinary inquiry at the intersection of psychoanalysis, Black feminist theory, trauma studies, and performance studies. The play anticipates contemporary debates about the limits of representation, the politics of visibility, and the ethics of spectatorship. By foregrounding fractured identity and unresolved trauma, Kennedy challenges academic paradigms that privilege coherence, resolution, and mastery.

Her work insists that certain experiences—particularly those shaped by racialized and gendered violence—can only be approached through fragmentation.

XI. CONCLUSION

Through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* emerges as a powerful exploration of fractured identity, linguistic instability, and unresolved trauma. Kennedy dramatizes subjectivity as perpetually divided—shaped by misrecognition, racialized imagery, and the limits of language. Clara's psychic fragmentation reveals the impossibility of coherent selfhood within dominant ideological structures that deny Black women symbolic recognition.

By refusing resolution and embracing fragmentation, Kennedy redefines subjectivity not as a unified essence but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by history, desire, and resistance. Her play stands as both an aesthetic innovation and a profound critique of the cultural systems that fracture Black female consciousness.

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