



IDENTITY UNDER SCRUTINY: RACE AND POWER IN PAUL BEATTY'S 'THE SELLOUT'

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Abstract

This study explores the critique of racism in popular American culture as it is portrayed in Paul Beatty's book *The Sellout*. The book delves into the ideas of racism and slavery, exposing the ways in which American society upholds racist stereotypes and acts of bigotry against racial minorities. Beatty advocates for racial harmony in line with American principles by addressing the injustices brought about by prejudice through the employment of characters like Hominy, Marpessa, and Ms. Susan Silverman. Using Beatty's novel as a lens through which to view mainstream American values - racism in particular - the research study highlights the efforts of marginalized communities for social justice and racial equality. In an effort to examine how racism affects American society, Beatty confronts racialized thinking and discusses topics including racism, slavery and prejudice. *The Sellout* highlights the negative impacts of racial thinking and institutional racism while shedding light on how white people hurt black people.

Keywords: Identity, Racism, Power Politics, Individualism, Consumerism, Subordination, Subversion

Introduction

Paul Beatty's satirical novel *The Sellout* (2015) is a biting satire that exposes the cherished myths of American racial politics. Beatty became the first American to win the coveted Man Booker Prize when this modern classic was awarded the prize. The protagonist, an African-American man going by the name

Me, embarks on a daring mission to re-segregate his city to achieve racial uplift. The novel is set in the fictional Los Angeles town of Dickens. Beatty examines the intricacies of identity and power within the confines of race and social standards through this bold story and explores issues of race and class in the United States. It focuses on an African-American protagonist named Me who grows up in the town of Dickens,

California, a town that has been removed from maps to prevent embarrassment after his father, a controversial sociologist, passes away. Bewildered, Me decides to bring back the town's former glory, which leads to ludicrous and startling incidents. The narrative examines the consequences of these choices, which finally lead Me to the Supreme Court, including using Hominy as his slave and separating the neighbourhood high school. By exposing the absurdity of racial relations, cultural standards, and the flawed legal system, Beatty challenges the reader to face America's racist past as well as the nuances of identity and personal responsibility through razor-sharp humour and wit. The novel's unconventional style and unrelenting sarcasm elicit thoughtful consideration of these significant subjects.

Review of Literature

In his work "Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* as Allegory of the US Carceral System" (2022), MJ Canelo offers a convincing interpretation of how Beatty's book alludes to the inequalities that exist within the American jail system. Canelo draws attention to the novel's indictment of systematic racism and the upholding of social injustices within the carceral system through careful analysis. In "Critique of Mainstream Racism in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" (2019), Suman Lamsal emphasizes how Beatty uses sardonic humour and irony to subvert cultural standards and racial stereotypes. The article explains the nuances of talking about race in modern literature and is a strong scholarly resource. In the article, "Pleading Human' in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" (2023), GD Naughton deftly dissects the novel's deep humour and moving reflection on race and uniqueness while examining the protagonist's search for identification amid social upheaval. In his book, "The *Sellout* by Paul Beatty: "Unmitigated Blackness" in Obama's America" (2018) John E. Davies explores Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* focusing on the protagonist's attempts to claim his identity in a highly charged racial

environment. Davies skillfully analyzes the novel's examination of blackness, following the protagonist's journey to self-discovery in the face of political upheaval and conventional norms.

Method of Research

To examine how Beatty depicts race, identity and power dynamics, as well as to determine whether this portrayal of identity resonates with larger societal issues and cultural discourses, a method that combines literary analysis and sociocultural critique is employed to study the text, analyze themes, characters, narrative techniques, and symbolism.

Objectives of the Study

The paper aims 1) to explore how Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* subverts traditional ideas of racial identity and power structures by analyzing the novel's depiction of race as a malleable and contentious concept in modern American culture. 2) to examine how comedy functions as a tool for subversion and social commentary in the novel's examination of identity politics, as well as to study the satirical strategies used by Beatty to challenge popular myths of race and power.

Discussion

The protagonist, Me, in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, struggles with an identity crisis brought on by the loss of his community. His sense of self and sense of belonging are both in jeopardy because of this loss. Beatty examines the intricate relationship between location and identity, especially in the context of African-American neighbourhoods, through the protagonist's attempts to put Dickens back on the Los Angeles map. Through the analysis of particular cases and the incorporation of academic perspectives, this conversation explores the protagonist's battle to recover his identity through his community's restoration.

Paul Beatty develops a primary character named Me, who is greatly influenced by Dickens's neighbourhood environment and his father. Beatty uses the protagonist's relationship with his father, which forms the basis of his identity, to examine the issue of loss. The protagonist experiences a rupture in his perception of self and lineage, as well as the absence of a parental figure, following the death of his father. Me's father is a contentious social scientist who conducted psychological tests on him. Though he was absent for a significant portion of the protagonist's life and employed unconventional tactics, his father's influence is evident. On his father's eternal absence, the protagonist Me expresses: "He left me behind, and all I had to show for it was this small town." (Beatty, 5) This quote emphasizes the protagonist's feeling of desertion and the gap his father's absence left.

Paul Beatty examines the complex interrelationship between identity and community in *The Sellout*, especially as it relates to African-American experiences. Beatty emphasizes the significant influence of location on identity development and cultural continuity through the protagonist's fight to put Dickens back on the Los Angeles map. emphasizes his agency and the importance of African-American heritage in the context of the greater urban landscape by taking back his community. Consequently, *The Sellout* presents a moving examination of the significance of location in moulding both personal and societal identities.

The main character ponders on the significant effects of losing both his father and Dickens, his hometown. Their disappearances make him feel lost and confused about who he is. He finds it difficult to define himself and to grasp who he is without these defining factors. The protagonist undergoes an existential crisis that paves the way for his quest for self-awareness. It is in his words: "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." (Beatty 35)

***The Sellout* as a Satirical Critique of Institutional Inequality and Policing and Ethnic Prejudices**

Power relationships, race, and social standing are all deeply entwined in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, revealing the institutionalized prejudices that African Americans must contend with. Beatty exposes the widespread racial disparities that these institutions support through the protagonist's contact with them; in particular, he draws attention to the justice system's duplicity.

The protagonist's interactions with law enforcement throughout the book highlight the racial prejudices inherent in policing. "The thing about my town, the thing about my people, was that our only real crime was existing in a world that was intolerant of us" (Beatty, 19), Me says about his encounter with the police in one particular case. This encapsulates the harsh environment African Americans live in, where a discriminatory system criminalizes them for simply existing. After examining the relationship between race and police, academics have concluded that because of well-rooted racial stereotypes, African Americans are disproportionately singled out by the police.

Beatty uses the Supreme Court incident in *The Sellout* as the main example of how the legal system is flawed. The irony and absurdity of a judicial system that purports to support equality but maintains racial inequality is brought to light by the defence made by Me, before the court. Me cites the systematic brutality his community faces in his argument: "We're living in a time when there's a very inordinate amount of Black people being shot by policemen" (Beatty, 289). The systemic disparities that fuel these injustices are ignored by the court despite this fact. Racial justice concerns are only taken up by the legal system when they serve the interests of the majority

white society. This perspective aligns with Beatty's depiction of the Supreme Court as a representation of systemic racism, wherein oppressed populations struggle to obtain justice.

Beatty employs *The Sellout* as a powerful platform to critique organizations that support racial inequity while disguising their actions as fair and just. He shows the ridiculousness of a system that calls itself colourblind yet routinely excludes African Americans by using fictitious scenarios and scathing comedy. Me consider the inconsistencies in the legal system: "Now, the laws and regulations that once denied us access to government contracts, parks, and schools were being used to defend us" (Beatty, 289). Beatty's wit is a potent weapon for tearing down the pretence of justice and facing the truth of systemic racism.

Paul Beatty addresses the institutional prejudices and ingrained power dynamics that support racial inequity in American society. He reveals the hypocrisy of institutions that purport to uphold justice but systemically marginalize African Americans through the protagonist's contacts with law enforcement and the legal system. He forces readers to face the hard realities of institutionalized oppression and systemic racism through insightful analysis and razor-sharp satire. Because of this, *The Sellout* is regarded as a foundational work that clarifies the nuances of racism, power, and justice in modern-day America.

Identity Crisis

A major theme in *The Sellout* is the protagonist's identity crisis. The Supreme Court hears arguments from the black narrator of the book, Me, who is accused of retaining slaves and racial segregation, as it explores racial relations in the US. Beatty creates a clear picture of modern America and the problems experienced by disenfranchised Black people by portraying a variety of characters. Along with other important characters, the protagonist battles

against social injustice, exploitation, and repression. Following Dickens' disappearance and the murder of his father, the narrator comes to terms with who he is, which sparks a coordinated protest against white supremacy. Through acts against segregation, characters like Hominy Jenkins, Marpessa, and Charishma are essential in assisting the narrator in reclaiming Black identity and history.

Beatty creates a figure that is a rebel against his surroundings as well as a product of it. The protagonist's perception of himself and his racial identity becomes more complex when his father pushes him to strange psychological tests meant to comprehend blackness. This upbringing causes a contradiction that Me fights throughout the novel, making it difficult to distinguish between self-awareness and societal labels. Restoring segregation and owning a slave are two of his activities, which may be interpreted as a contentious kind of satire that highlights the unsolved problems with racial identity and autonomy Paul Beatty examines the contradictory aspects of racial identity in *The Sellout*, utilizing the experiences of his protagonist, Me. The story takes place in a satirical setting where radical deeds and contentious choices mirror more significant racial and identity-related social issues. Through an analysis of particular instances and the incorporation of academic perspectives, this conversation underscores how the protagonist's identity problem drives the work's investigation of race and agency. The father of the main character, who employs his son as a test subject for numerous psychological studies to examine the idea of blackness, has a tremendous influence on the protagonist's identity. An early section of the book describes one of the most remarkable experiments: "Dad leaned over the desk and whispered, 'You ain't shit,' thereby reinforcing my low self-esteem and completely fucking me up for life" (Beatty, 12). The aforementioned episode demonstrates the harsh techniques his father employs while disguising them as social research, which has an immediate

effect on Me's sense of identity and self-perception. This experimental upbringing serves as a metaphor for the societal experiment that is America: a blend of systemic racism and democracy.

Among the most contentious aspects of the book are Me's choice to own Hominy Jenkins, a slave, and to reestablish segregation in Dickens. Hominy, who willingly submits to Me as a slave, is a prime example of both internalized racism and a sick nostalgia for a time when racial roles were distinct but repressive. Hominy says: "Massa, I want to be your real live-in true blue American slave." (Beatty, 97) This startling—yet ridiculous—statement criticizes the persistent romanticization or trivialization of America's racist past in certain circles. The post-racial beliefs are being criticized by this extravagant display. Beatty challenges the idea that America has transcended race and forces a reckoning with its denial of its racist past by exaggerating racial dynamics to absurd heights.

The narrative comes to a turning point when Me argues for his acts in front of the Supreme Court, highlighting both the ridiculousness of his circumstances and the racial issues facing society. This highlights Me's dual identity as an environment product and an instigator. he claims "...I did for Dickens what the white man never could and what the government refused to do—I brought the community together" (Beatty, 289). His criticism of the government's ineffectual racial integration and community development efforts is encapsulated in this sardonic remark.

Paul Beatty explores the intricacies of racial identity moulded by an odd upbringing and social expectations through the figure of Me. Even if his acts are humorous, they reflect his struggle with a discordant identity that has been moulded by a racially heated atmosphere that affects how black people view and live their lives. Beatty challenges readers to reevaluate the

myths that have created racial understanding and miscommunication in modern society by asking them to analyze the absurdity and tragedy of racial relations in America through the lens of Me. As a result, *The Sellout* offers a critical commentary on the larger societal constructions of race and identity in addition to being a story of a personal identity crisis.

Identity Crisis Stems from The Loss of His Father and Hometown

The protagonist's conception of race and identity is greatly influenced by his father, a contentious social scientist. The protagonist nonetheless acknowledges his father's impact on his sense of self, despite their tense relationship and the unusual tactics his father used. But after his father vanishes, the protagonist finds himself without the parental supervision and mentorship that had shaped his childhood. His sense of himself is shaken by this loss, leaving him floating aimlessly and unsure of himself.

Dickens, the protagonist's hometown, holds a special place in his heart. Not only is Dickens a real location, but it also represents his sense of identity and cultural background. Dickens's departure symbolizes the severing of the bonds that bound him to his identity and the erasing of his community. The protagonist, who had previously felt rooted and connected, is now disoriented and without a feeling of purpose and belonging in Dickens' absence.

The protagonist experiences an existential crisis when both his father and his hometown pass away at the same time. Without these defining influences, he struggles to define himself and struggles with issues of selfhood and identity. His sense of bewilderment and disorientation as he tries to make his way through a world that seems more and more foreign is well captured.

In addition to his father's influence, the Dickens community's traditions and customs

also have an impact on the protagonist's identity. The protagonist's idea of self is shaped by the intersection and interaction of these two influences. He considers his childhood, for instance, saying, "I was raised by a single father in a predominantly Black community..." (Beatty, 8). Academics have investigated the intersections between race and identity, contending that a person's identity is moulded by a variety of elements, such as cultural contexts and familial ties. Examining the intricate interactions between these many factors is necessary to comprehend identity. In the novel, Beatty emphasizes the complex network of influences that define the protagonist's personality by showing him as a product of both the cultural environment of the Dickens community and his father's teachings. The loss of both has left him in a chaotic predicament. He explains his helplessness and how he has lost his identity: "... 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." (Beatty 35)

The protagonist's identity is also profoundly shaped by the community setting created by Dickens. Dickens is a made-up Los Angeles community that is presented as a microcosm of African-American history and culture. Thinking back on his relationship with Dickens, Me proclaims: "I'm Dickens's son, we don't play that" (Beatty, 14). The protagonist's attachment to his community and sense of belonging are emphasized by this phrase. Researchers have looked at the significance of community in African-American literature, highlighting how it helps people feel like they belong and maintain cultural traditions. Communities, according to Hooks, act as centres of affirmation for cultural heritage and resistance against oppression. Dickens is portrayed in the book as a thriving community that helps the protagonist find their identity and gives them a sense of support and belonging.

Reconstructing Identity

Dickens is portrayed as more than just a place in the book; it's a representation of the protagonist's identity, past, and worldview. "You can't fight city hall, but you can goddamn sure erase it from the map" (Beatty 8) is how one can see Dickens' significance. The protagonist's resolve to protect his community's legacy and identity in the face of erasure is summed up in this sentence. The idea of community has been examined by academics as being fundamental to the African-American experience, with an emphasis on the function of collective identity in upholding cultural legacy and fending against injustice. According to Hooks, communities act as hubs of resistance against prevailing narratives of control and power. Dickens is an example of this collective identity; he personifies the protagonist's feeling of acceptance and inheritance of culture.

The protagonist wants to assert the importance of his neighbourhood and recover his identity, which is why he is working to have Dickens back on the Los Angeles map. He declares: "Without Dickens, the rest of the map was meaningless." (Beatty, 31) This concept emphasizes the protagonist's conviction that his community's existence within the greater metropolitan environment is intrinsically related to who he is. The physical environments of towns and neighbourhoods are vital for promoting a feeling of identity and cultural continuity. Beatty highlights in the novel the critical role that location plays in the construction of identity, showing how the protagonist's sense of self is threatened by the absence of community.

The addition of Dickens to the Los Angeles map also signifies the re-establishment of African- American empowerment and agency. His interpretation of the significance of this action is as follows: "Re-erecting Dickens on the map was more than a symbolic victory. It was a

necessary condition for my existential validation.” (Beatty, 140) This claim emphasizes the protagonist’s conviction that maintaining his community is crucial to proving his existence and staking his claim in society. Sociologists have examined how symbolism functions in African-American literature and have concluded that actions of restoration and resistance are powerful symbols of defiance against structural injustice. They contend that maintaining cultural legacy and claiming collective identity depends on these acts of disobedience. Beatty uses Dickens’ restoration as a potent symbol of defiance against erasure and proof of the tenacity of African- American communities in the novel.

Despite obstacles and resistance, the main character never wavers in his resolve to bring Dickens back to life. He is prepared to battle for the preservation of his town and won’t allow it to be removed from the Los Angeles map. He muses on the significance of Dickens to his own feeling of self and belonging throughout the book, and his actions and words reflect this commitment. The challenges he faces don’t stop him. His determination can be seen in his words: “I refused to relinquish my childhood home and all the memories, good and bad, that went along with it.” (Beatty, 62)

Microcosm of Me’s Struggle for Identity

The main character, Me aka the Sellout, organizes the Dickens, California, community to strengthen their voice as a whole and recover a sense of identity. By engaging in provocative behaviours and educational initiatives, he challenges preconceptions and prejudices about his culture and increases awareness among a wider audience. *The Sellout* also manoeuvres across the legal and political spheres, using non-traditional strategies to defend Dickens citizens’ rights and hold those who would marginalize them accountable. He challenges power systems and emphasizes the lasting effects of previous injustices by using historical data in order to

claim his agency in forming his community and his own identity.

Community Mobilization

The main character organizes Dickens locals and supporters from nearby towns to launch grassroots initiatives aimed at putting their town back on the map. Through community organizing, they plan demonstrations, fairs, and group activities meant to further their cause. Me explains how he incorporates his community in his campaign: “We organized rallies and protests, demanding that Dickens be reinstated on the map.” (Beatty, 85) He mobilizes public opinion in support of the preservation of his community by bringing attention to the erasure of his community through a variety of channels, such as social media and public forums. He narrates: “I started a grassroots campaign to raise awareness about the disappearance of Dickens.” (Beatty, 62)

Political Fight

Recognizing the importance of political influence, Me takes part in lobbying campaigns to win over legislators and other decision-makers. He uses his political contacts, town hall participation, and lobbying skills to push for the restoration of Dickens as a top legislative priority. In this process: “I met with city council members and state representatives to advocate for the reinstatement of Dickens.” (Beatty, 107)

Legal Fight

The protagonist files a lawsuit to contest Dickens’ removal from the Los Angeles map. He uses the legal system to demand the restoration of his community and to prove its existence. The protagonist pursues legal challenges and appeals to continue his quest for justice even in the face of bureaucratic roadblocks and legal defeats. Refusing to give up, he keeps looking into every legal option to reverse Dickens’ erasure and ensure its rightful location on the map. He admits: “I filed a lawsuit against the

city of Los Angeles for trespassing, emotional distress, and violating my civil rights by destroying my property." (Beatty, 5)

Using Historical Evidence

The protagonist gathers historical evidence and carries out research to support his claim that Dickens should be restored, emphasizing the importance of his town to the development of Los Angeles. He compiles proof of Dickens' contributions to the cultural legacy of the city and makes a strong case for its return to the map. He recounts his efforts how he tries to provide historical evidence for the existence of Dickens: "I researched the history of Dickens and presented evidence of its significance to the city." (Beatty, 121) does everything in his power to succeed in his endeavours. Understanding the value of cooperative relationships, the protagonist looks to form partnerships with groups and people who share their values in promoting social justice and community empowerment. To strengthen the voice of his community and its advocacy activities, he forms partnerships with academic institutions, advocacy groups, and civil rights groups.

Paul Beatty investigates the complex interplay between community and identity, especially as it relates to African-American experiences. Beatty emphasizes the significant influence of location on identity development and cultural continuity through the protagonist's fight to put Dickens back on the Los Angeles map. The protagonist emphasizes his agency and the importance of African-American heritage in the context of the greater urban landscape by taking back his community. Consequently, *The Sellout* presents a moving examination of the significance of location in moulding both personal and societal identities.

The Personal Interaction with the Men and Matter of His Community

Me manages complicated relationships with his father, friends, and fellow Dickens

residents, all of whom have an impact on how he perceives himself and his place in the world. His identity is shaped by these relationships, which also aid in his development.

Me struggles with the ideas and lessons his father implanted in him. The protagonist's perspective is significantly impacted by his father's radical theories regarding race and identity as well as his nontraditional approaches. "My father had his ideas about how black folks should act, think, and identify themselves..." (Beatty, 7) His relationship with his father is not smooth sailing. As he tries to balance his father's expectations with his own wishes and beliefs, the protagonist and his father have a tense and conflicted relationship. But as the story goes on, Me starts to accept their relationship and how it has influenced who he is. He admits: "I had to come to terms with my relationship with my father and how it shaped my identity" (Beatty, 107). Despite having a different relationship with his father than other sons, Me's relationship with his father shapes how he sees himself and his role in the world. He struggles with issues of autonomy and authenticity as he tries to define himself apart from the impact of his father.

The protagonist's elderly companion and former child actor, Hominy, is a source of amusement as well as annoyance. Hominy's presence challenges the protagonist's ideas about race and power despite their tense interaction. Me's romantic interest, Marpessa, serves as a link to his history and his neighbourhood. He is prompted to consider his own identity and the meaning of his heritage by their interaction. Me admits that he had to face the difficulties of love, identity, and belonging because of Marpessa. Another Dickens resident named Foy personifies the conflict between tradition and advancement in the neighbourhood. His lobbying and action force Me to reflect on his part in determining Dickens's future. Foy's dedication to maintaining Dickens served as a reminder to the

main character of the value of community and teamwork. The protagonist's idea of community is shaped by his contacts with Dickens' neighbours and friends. He discovers camaraderie and a sense of belonging in his group via shared experiences and assistance from one another. He has never had more of a feeling of purpose and belonging than he does in the company of his friends and neighbours. In *The Sellout*, the main character negotiates the complexities of identity, belonging, and community. Every encounter acts as a springboard for development and self-awareness, adding to his complex understanding of who he is and where he fits in his community.

Conclusion

One way to interpret the protagonist's journey through the book is as an effort to come to terms with these losses and create a new identity. In an effort to establish his identity and reclaim his neighbourhood in the face of erasure, he sets out on a mission to have Dickens placed back on the Los Angeles map. The protagonist seeks to reinvent himself through this act of repair, taking control of his own story and remaking himself according to his own standards. Themes of identity, loss, and self-discovery are prevalent in *The Sellout*. It highlights the protagonist's intense sense of displacement and the life-changing quest he goes on to find purpose and belonging in a world full of tragedy and change.

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