

# Racial Discrimination And Stereotyping In Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle: A Critical Study

Dr. Gowher Ahmad Naik<sup>1</sup>, Sanjay Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lovely Professional University, [gowher.22117@lpu.co.in](mailto:gowher.22117@lpu.co.in)

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar of Ph.D., Lovely Professional University, [sanjaymadaan85@gmail.com](mailto:sanjaymadaan85@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The White Boy Shuffle is Paul Beatty's debut novel, raising racial issues in the United States of America. In this novel, Beatty, the Man Booker prize-winning author, discusses racial problems through the protagonist Gunnar Kaufman. Gunnar is an African-American who suffers discrimination, demoralization, mistreatment, and prejudice. Beatty has portrayed racism prevails throughout the novel and depicts African-Americans as hopeless. Paul Beatty has delineated the stereotypical images of blacks and shown how white people use stereotypical comments on blacks to make them feel belittled. Gunnar is an exception to his community as he gets success instead of falling into the trap of racial barriers. Beatty explores that blacks have been targeted in America. He avers that African-Americans have suffered from misrecognition due to their race. They have been belittled, denigrated, and subjugated by the whites and the policies of the United States of America. Beatty reflects that there are many negative stereotypes against black Americans. The white people have used this to undermine the identity of blacks and consider them inferior. Moreover, the white people tortured the blacks, so they chose to commit suicide instead of living their lives under slavery and demonization. This paper aims to trace that white people have discriminated against African-Americans. This has been analyzed from the perspective of Dr. Cornel West.

**Keywords:** Racism, discrimination, stereotype, identity, African-American.

## Introduction

The White Boy Shuffle by Paul Beatty got published in 1996. It is his debut novel in which he talks about racial discrimination through the character of Gunnar Kaufman. Beatty reveals that blacks feel unsophisticated in the white culture. Gunnar is a black character who, during his childhood, lives with his mother and two sisters in Santa Monica. The narrator tells about his childhood memories when he spent time with white boys. He has friends such as Steven Pierce, Ryan Foggerty, and Daid Schoenfeld. They are very cheerful and have no enemies. However, they would fight with their sisters. Gunnar reveals

that he has suffered many admonishments. The police officers were jealous of Gunnar because of his race and always warned him about any atrocity done by his friends. However, they did not say anything to his friends and threatened him about his future. Here, he tries to assimilate into their culture. However, he cannot help but feel inferior because of his race. Still, he enjoys a happy childhood in Santa Monica and is called a "funny and cool black guy." It means that as a black boy, he is harmless. The novel's protagonist has a distinction, an exceptional quality, to remain calm when the whites make jokes about blacks. He participates in a lot of mischief with

his white friends, but every time the police target him for being black.

I suffered through countless admonishments from over-zealous officers lucky enough to grab one of us in some act of mischief that was always a precursor to a lifetime of incarceration bunking with society's undesirables. "Young man, try to imagine a future behind bars." What you in for, young buck? (The White Boy Shuffle 31)

Gunnar explains that he is delighted with white boys. He plays pranks with them, but the police always threaten him to be black. Beatty, through Gunnar, has displayed racial discrimination against African-Americans. It shows how the police said explicit prejudice toward him for being black, humiliating him and causing him to be in a state of confusion and disorder. Blacks always feel insecure in the white culture. They remain oppressed and calm. Dr. Cornel West says that race is an issue of significant concern in the United States. It forces the people of African-Americans to live in poverty, paranoia, sorrow, grief, and distrust. West has discussed social issues like problems related to the black community, the Los Angeles Riots 1992, demonstrations for equality and justice, and the impact of Malcolm X. Dr. Cornel West has written in *Race Matters*,

Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair and distrust. (107)

In Phillis Wheatley High school, every student must have to attend an assembly named "Young Black and Latino Men: Endangered Species." The principal Henrietta Newcombe opens the

meeting, and the purpose of the conference is to "liberate us from a cult of self-destructiveness and brainwash us into joining a sect of benevolent middle-class American normalcy" (134). She conducts motivational speeches for the students and helps them free themselves from self-destructiveness. Newcombe asks questions from students to know about the maltreatment done towards them by the whites, like "..... have you ever been handcuffed" (134)? Gunnar raises his hand at this question, and the principal invites him to relate his story. She says that you all can see how a person of color is targeted despite his being academically and athletically gifted by white. Newcombe gently asks Gunnar, "How old were you when the white man shackled you like a captured African animal?" (135). Beatty, with such questions, shows how the blacks are trained to be social in society, and the treatment against them is inhumane. They are being misbehaved due to their race and color.

Psycho Loco asks Gunnar about his girlfriends. Gunnar tells about his one white girlfriend named Eileen. Psycho Loco offers that he will find a bride for Gunnar. At this, Gunnar hesitates, but he knows he will never start a romance alone. Gunnar says he is stuck to Judeo-Christian ethics that he picked from American television and British romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Psycho Loco utters that "You crazy? How could anyone do that shit?" Don't even think about it. It's like slavery or something" (149). Beatty shows how black people believe marrying a white girl is slavery. After that, Gunnar changes the topics and starts talking about Rodney King. Gunnar states that Rodney King deserves that ass kicking because he resists the arrest. To defend himself, the police officer shoots Rodney. On their way home, they discuss the harassment done towards them by the police officers due to race.

Being frisked in front of our parents, forced to pull out pants down near the day-care center,

made to wait face down in the streets with our hands interlocked behind our heads and feet crossed at the ankles, gritty foot-prints on the nape of our necks. (149)

Beatty reveals how blacks are treated like animals by the police officers in America. They have to undergo harsh and inhumane punishment. Blacks are made to stand in public with their pants down or sometimes before their parents, as is discussed above. The novel is based on racial discrimination. The whites used their way to put their fault on blacks. Beatty mentions, through Gunnar, black Frankenstein who was given an electric current of 50000 volts. He pathetically asks the whites "if the battery of the American nigger was being recharged or drained." (150)

During the summer camp in Oregon, when Gunnar is out of home, he writes a letter to his mother. First, he informs him about the situation at the camp to his mother. Second, he expresses his grief for his sisters not living with his mother. They are pregnant and living with Gunnar's father. Third, Gunnar tells about the discrimination he faces at the camp due to his color. Finally, he informs us that the center has one hundred best high school basketball players.

I am the last in line to do everything. Last to eat. Last to use the shower. Last to get issued the camp sweats and practice uniforms with 100 emblazoned on the back. In college prep class, I have to sit way in the back. Not that I'm missing anything. College prep amounts to an etiquette lesson on how to behave once we get there. (170)

Beatty highlights racial discrimination when Gunnar is given the hundredth position everywhere in the camp, whether eating, using the shower, or taking sweets. On his uniform, it shows the number 100. This is a stark form of

discrimination against blacks. Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, writes, "Advanced culture, have rarely offered anything to individual but imperialism, racism and ethnocentrism" (204). But he assures his mother not to be worried and says these condescending people are feeding me.

Once Ms. Cegeny was teaching in the third class about science and asked Melissa to start reading. Melissa reads the topic 'Fun with Sunshine and Thermodynamics.' Ms. Cegeny relates the topic that sunshine is cool with a comment on blacks. Melissa reads, "Dark colors .... Such as ..... black absorb sunlight ..... and light colors ..... such as ..... white reflect sunlight" (36). To stereotype blacks as hot, she says that dark colors soak up the ray of sunshine; that is why blacks are hot. On the other hand, a light color like white tends to alter the radiation path; it reflects sunlight, which is why it is cool. Beatty recalls that the whites have a stereotypical image of blacks as hot, which is very well described in the novel with fun.

Ms. Cegeny stresses the importance of living in a colorblind society and asks for examples of colorblindness from the students. One student says 'justice.' Millicent shouts, "The president sure seems to like people of color" (38). When the teacher raises the question to Gunnar, he says, "dogs." The Health department workers once came to check up on the students' health. The teacher Cegeny calls Gunnar, and there are a nurse and an old doctor among the workers. The doctor asks Gunnar to pull the pants and touches his ball to test for a hernia. Next, he urges Gunnar to cough. Then the nurse tells Gunnar to read the numbers on the pattern of colored dots. Gunnar reads without any difficulty and asks what he is being tested for. The old doctor says that he is being tested for colorblindness. Gunnar replies that our teacher supposes us to be colorblind. The nurse says that she is talking about human colors.

"So just pretend that you don't see color. Don't say things like

“Black people are lecherous, violent, natural-born criminals.”

“But I’m black.”

“Oh, I hadn’t noticed.” (39)

Beatty uses the stereotypical images of blacks in hilarious form; on the one hand, it is said that there is no racism. But on the other hand, whites have some fixed images of blacks as lustful, violent, and natural-born criminals. Gunnar one day thinks with his friends about color on our terms. They try to make their definition of color, trying their hardest not to stay inside the lines. For blacks, they say that blacks are unwanted dogs and blacks are niggers. Beatty uses these stereotypical images of blacks in the novel in a funny way.

In his school at Manischewitz Junior High in the valley, Gunnar chooses drama and becomes the fellow of Scoby. They prepare themselves for Shakespearean soliloquy finals at Anita Bryant Junior High in the valley. Gunnar is called on the stage to represent Iago of Othello, and he moves to the stage and looks at the judges. Then he starts his temporary substitute of monologue and expresses what the judges think of him. What stereotypical image do they have of him as a black boy?

What dost thou know me for? A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking whoreson ..... one trunk-inheriting slave ..... beggar, Nigger..... I will beat you into clamorous whining if thou deny’st the least syllable of thy addition. (86)

Gunnar's words are a typical example of his stereotypical image of what the white judges have. They think of blacks as dishonest men, a mischievous or cheeky person. The whites consider black boys as beggars, niggers and take them as a son of whore. The whites believe the

blacks are despicable people. These are the stereotypical images that Beatty has talked about in the novel.

Gunnar at Hillside school is very close to Coach Shimmito, who tells him to do with life during basketball practice. Beatty here uses another example of the stereotype that a successful black person is considered the son raised by single mothers with a surrogate father figure who turns their lives around. He sees their potential and lets them run on the path of glory. But Gunnar says that his coach is not like that. Gunnar talks more to Nicholas Scoby after coach. Both Scoby and Gunnar in the tenth grade play basketball together. Nick Scoby is a wizard, and Gunnar is his apprentice. In a match with the opposing team, Scoby performs very well, but the opposing team's coach shouts at them to stop Scoby. One of them hits an elbow in Scoby's temple, and Scoby has to take a rest. Gunnar plays well in that match, and his coach praises him, "What a competitor. What self-control. That hold on emotions will take you far, wait and see, Gunnar" (139). Beatty shows that Gunnar's talent thrives after coming to Hillside. He was not getting good opportunities due to racism in Santa Monica. Dr. Cornel West writes in *Race Matters*, “None of us alone can save the nation or world. But each of us can make a positive difference if we commit ourselves to do so” (109). It is believed that America has become a post-racial America and is improving. But racial tension cannot be removed by making laws. However, West states that blacks and whites can make a positive difference and save the nation if they are committed. They should work in unity and give equal opportunities to everyone.

### **Conclusion:**

Paul Beatty has highlighted the challenges of racial discrimination and stereotyping in American society in contemporary times. Though the magnitude of these aspects is minimal, but it requires intense policies and consideration to

about these challenges in American society. The protagonist, Gunnar, belongs to the black community; as a result of this, he suffers from atrociousness, and the white people have caricatured and mocked him. Beatty has reflected that such comments on blacks are still prevalent in America, and blacks are demoralized and dehumanized due to their colour. Throughout the novel, Beatty stands for the rights of the black community as they are humans like all other human beings. They should not be discriminated and deprived of their social, cultural, educational, and economic values and opportunities. American society is based on the principles of pluralism and diversity so each and every culture must be honoured and respected rather suffer from ridicule and belittle. Gunnar turns out victorious in the end despite immense challenges. He finally achieves triumph by becoming a poet and a good basketball player.

#### Works Cited:

1. Abinaya, D. "Identity Shift in Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle." Pune Research Times, Vol.2, Iss. 2, 2017.
2. Beatty, Paul. The White Boy Shuffle. Oneworld,1996.
3. Fuentes, Marcela. "Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle: Teaching True Diversity."Language Arts Journal of Michigan, Volume 18, Iss.1, Article 12, 2002, pp. 63-65.
4. Kalich, Natalie. "An Anthropological Rending of the Ghetto: Intersections of High and Popular Culture in Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle." Midwest Modern Language Association, Vol. 42, No.1 (Spring 2009), pp.77-88.
5. Kumar, Sanjay and Gowher Ahmad Naik. "African-American Discrimination: A Study of Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle." Sambodhi, Volume 43, Issue 04(X1), 2020, pp. 147-150.
6. ----. "Race, Issues and Perspectives: A Critical Study of Its Genealogy." Journal of Critical Reviews, Volume 7, Issue 14, 2020, pp. 4240-4242.
7. Naik, Gowher Ahmad. Multiculturalism and Socio-Political Issues in Select Novels of Zadie Smith and Amy Tan. 2017, Lovely Professional University, PhD Dissertation. shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/235382>
8. Naik, Gowher Ahmad and Sanjay Kumar. "Misrecognition and Struggle For Identity of Blacks: A Study of Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle and The Sellout." PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology, Volume 17, Issue 6, 2020, pp. 14863-14867.
9. Raj, P. Robert. "Third Space in Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle." Literary Herald, Vol. 4, Iss. 6, April 2019, pp. 148-152.
10. Said, Edward. Orientalism. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
11. Shobha, P. "African American Experience in Edward P. Jones and Paul Beatty's Selected Novels." International Journal of Academic Research and Development, Vol. 3, Iss. 2, March 2018, pp. 681-684.
12. Stallings, L. H. "Punked for Life: Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle and Radical Black Masculinities." African American Review, Volume 43, No. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 99-116.
13. West, Cornel. Race Matters. Bacon Press, 1994.