

2018

The Journey To Awareness of an African Girl-Child

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Recommended Citation

Nguru, Joy N. (2018) "The Journey To Awareness of an African Girl-Child," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol2/iss1/2>

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Abstract

This paper explains my journey as an African girl-child coming into the awareness of who she is and how she perceived change in a new environment. As a young girl migrating to a different country, understanding and adjusting to a new set of rules became crucial. Social identities such as race, gender, and class became things that I was opened to in a new land. I had to be a fast learner, or I would be left behind. Kenya being my origin, I became accustomed to many things, so when I moved to a new country my perspective shifted. How I once viewed the world is not how I view it currently. I allowed this journey to happen. It can be painful for some, but it made me stronger. Through self-analysis and reflection, this article explores how an individual's social identities and self-awareness are influenced by the world around them and the people they interact with.

Keywords: African, gender, class, intersectionality, identity.

The Journey to Awareness of an African Girl-Child

A wise African man once said, “If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven’t spent the night with a mosquito.” Albeit such a small creature, how you contend with a mosquito determines how much rest you attain during the night. This African proverb relates to me in a manner not many people can understand. A small, young girl migrating to a different country and having to understand and comprehend a new set of rules is required and expected to be a fast learner. While I was meeting with one of my teachers in New Hampshire to go over how classes work in the United States, she stared at me silently for a full minute, which made me wonder whether or not I had something on my face. As I was about to ask her if something was wrong, she chose that moment to speak out what was going through her mind and said, “You need to learn how things work around here, Joy” with all seriousness written on her face. I waited for her to explain what she meant, but she went back to going over what had brought me to her office in the first place.

Those words struck a chord in me and made me fearful because she stated it in a manner that indicated she pitied me. As if she truly believed that I would not last long in this country-- and in some ways, she was right. At that moment in my life, I had such a rose-colored view of America, also known as the land of opportunity, and truly believed everything would make sense in my life once I was there. With time, I realized that I had become even more confused due to various reasons, but one key reason was: I came into the awareness that I am a Black woman. Now, some people will ask me, “How? Didn’t you know you were black the moment you were born?” And my answer is always, “No, I did not.” In Kenya, the two social identities I had to deal with were class and gender; however, in America it became a whole different ball game because race was suddenly thrown at me and I did not know what to do with it.

Situating the Self

Our own identities are not solely based on what we choose to call ourselves at the end of the day. Rather, they are based on what was put together years before we were born and how we happen to fit into them. According to Bell (2013), some of our social identities, like race, ethnicity, gender and others, are acquired either at birth or can be adjusted or developed during our lifetime. Society molds us to fit into this big puzzle and in this puzzle, some pieces end up growing bigger over time, squeezing the other pieces into formation. The bigger pieces would form the oppressor group while the other small pieces would be the oppressed group. The joining of pieces represents the privilege and easily acquired resources the oppressor group has. For instance, in terms of race, white people can thrive without other people being astounded, nor do they have to deal with a never-ending and draining stream of attention to their race (Adams, 2013). In terms of gender, “men are more likely than women to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and to have their contributions taken seriously” (Adams, 2013, pg. 18). Kenyan society is built upon the ideals of patriarchy, where men always have the last say and women should bow their heads and take it. However, over time, we have shown vast improvement because we currently have women governors and leaders like Minister Martha Karua and the late political, environmental activist Wangari Maathai.

In Kenya, I identified as a middle-class *Kikuyu* woman; *Kikuyu* being my tribe. Class and gender were the most salient social identities for me. With class, the income you accumulate in your job speaks volumes to how others perceive and respect you. At the primary school I went to, I was regarded with respect because my parents were punctual in paying for my school fees, most of the time. We did have days when we struggled, but it worked out in the end. The

teachers and even the headmaster knew my parents, and therefore kept a close eye on me while I was in school. I do acknowledge now that it was a privilege I had back then.

With gender, the fact that I am a woman did affect how I was seen in society. Young girls are groomed to be good wives for their future husbands. Yet, the concept that a girl has to learn how to cook and clean for her future husband did not sit well with me. I always believed that as a woman you learn to cook and to clean for yourself first. Let it be a part of who you are and if you do choose to get married then you can bring those qualities into your marriage and future family, but the Kenyan community frowns upon such ideals. It is one of the reasons my parents and I quarreled constantly. Since I am the only girl in the family, the responsibility to uphold those traditions and customs fell on me.

When the time came for my family and me to move to America, even though the environment changed, the traditions were still upheld in the family, as well as in the Kenyan diaspora here in the United States. I first moved to New Hampshire and got transferred to a middle school where I noticed that the other children did not look like me. As mentioned by Adams (2013), “a ‘black woman’ in Africa, therefore, who has not experienced white racism, does not think of herself as black or experience herself as black nor do the people around her; ‘African, yes, a woman, yes. But not a black woman’” (p. 15). I do agree with this statement; I came into the realization that I was black the day my classmates started asking me where I was from and negatively commenting on the way I dressed, acted and looked. I remember I went home later that day, looked in the mirror and said to myself, “I am black,” while looking at my skin, as if to confirm if this was true. The dark pigment of my skin had never defined me before, but it seemed that in America, I now had to carry that identity given to me by society. I still had to deal with the fact that I was a woman and the discrimination that came with that. I was

constantly overlooked and ignored. Additionally, my family and I were no longer in the middle-class status. We were on the borderline of being poor and not being able to cover our bills, grateful that we could make it from month to month, so I had to wrap my head around all these shifting identities and come face to face with them all at once.

As Barak, Leighton, and Flavin (2010) pointed out, “the widely used phrase ‘women and minorities’ does not consider that approximately 15 percent of the population is both women and racial or ethnic minorities. Women of color cannot choose to be treated as a member of the oppressed sex one day and a member of the oppressed racial group the next, they are and will always be: BOTH” (p. 135). I do not get to choose what kind of oppression I go through every day; they all come at me at the same time and if I am not mindful and attentive to what is going on then I feel like I automatically become a participant in the oppression I experience. As Adams (2013) clearly stated, “It can be challenging to discover that skin color, accented speech, perceived gender or sexual orientation, or the presence or absence of a physical or mental disability, are themselves socially constructed categories and are, therefore, useless indicators of character, intelligence or morality” (p. 4). Who I am on the inside is not defined by how I look on the outside, and my surroundings and my personality are not based on my skin color and neither is my astuteness. At times, I believe I must constantly prove this fact to the world by how I choose to live my life.

“If you want to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, go together.” This African saying can explain the many issues we currently have in the United States. The American system is founded on the notion of individualism where you handle your own business, and if you are suffering, it is because you did not work hard enough for the life you wanted. In rural Kenya, we believe that a young person is raised by the whole village, and that unity is the key to building a

great and forward moving society. The excellent nature of individual black achievement today in previously white domains is a good display that the old Jim Crow is dead, but it does not mean the society has progressed past the racial caste (Alexander, 2012, p. 21). One black person's achievement does not eliminate nor erase the suffering the rest of the black community goes through.

Alexander (2012) explained that the system of racial control has advanced over time to the point where it has been perfected and has become resistant to challenge, consequently making it capable of enduring for generations to come (p. 22). Bell (2015) identified two themes that come with the perception of racism: first, racism is a system of oppression that not only affects the targeted group, but the dominant group as well. The targeted group becomes condemned and abused while the dominant group suffers intrinsic and social aggression. While the targeted group deals with the backlash that comes from racism, the dominant group deals with it inwardly where as their psyche becomes affected with how they deal with others around them. Second, racism happens in the oblivious mindsets and actions of a society that believes in an unrecognized but prevalent white cultural custom (Bell, 2013). Racism is not only evident through obvious, deliberate prejudice and discrimination but also through what our thoughts are about other racial groups and the unintentional behaviors we act on. We need to affirm and value social and cultural differences if we are to envision a society that acknowledges and appreciates such differences (Adams, 2013). Diversity in the United States is one of the factors that makes this country great and powerful. Therefore, acceptance is needed to really value the different cultures and identities that every social group has. Adams (2013) reminded us that "it is necessary [for us] to understand injustice, if we are veering to dismantle the institutions and policies that maintain injustice and to reconstruct institutions and policies based on fairness

equity, and justice” (p. 2). One must simply understand the problem before tackling it. We need to get to the root of the problems we have and not just deal with the leaves and branches.

Bell’s (2013) notion of psychological colonization is useful for understanding how disadvantaged groups sometimes adopt their oppressed condition in accordance to the oppressive ideology and social system. I used to have the mentality that discrimination is something I must get used to and it is a part of me and who I was meant to be, that is, inferior and constantly at the bottom. But with knowledge and understanding, I have come to realize the importance of speaking out against that which is not right. Harriet Tubman once said, “I freed a thousand slaves, I could have freed more if only they knew they were slaves” (Medrut, 2018). Such powerful words from a great woman; in that simple statement she clearly outlined the power of the mind. When your discomfort with racism becomes more powerful than your fear or insecurity about challenging the system, then you become compelled to take some action (Young, 2013). It all begins in the mind. You must know who you are and what you stand for to come to terms with what it is you are fighting against and what it is you are fighting for.

Conclusion

Knowledge truly is power; your eyes open and you begin to see the world in a new light. It is not easy to simply erase something that you gained comprehension about; the awareness will prompt you to do something about it (Young, 2013). My perception of America is definitely not as it once was. I have come to understand that no country is perfect, not even America. My rose-colored glasses are now clear. This journey has not been easy. There are moments where I know in my mind that I am being discriminated against, but do not even know what to say or how to respond. The first day I spoke against someone looking down on me because I am a Black

woman from Africa, I felt powerful in that moment. It was like I regained the power and dignity that was stripped from me when I came here.

Class and gender were the two areas in my life I had to deal with in Kenya yet, in America, race became a salient identity, as well. From the little girl I was migrating to a different country and having to understand a new set of rules, I adapted and became flexible to my surroundings. If I could, I would love to meet with the same teacher from New Hampshire whose statement stayed with me. I would look at her the same way she did me for one minute and then simply tell her, “You were right. I needed to know how things work around here but I think I have a very good idea now.” Since as I am not the small girl I once was and as my audience, having learned so much after reading this paper, I hope you never get to think of yourself as too small to make a difference. If you do, then plan to spend the night with an African mosquito. I guarantee you will never forget that regardless of how small the size, the impact can still be great.

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