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MISCEGENATION AND MIXED-RACE CHILDREN IN GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON'S PLAYS

*Out of the 28 plays written by Georgia Douglas Johnson, the famous Harlem Renaissance author, only 12 have survived. Two of them deal with sexual relationships between white men and black women and with the position of the children born of these marriages. In the play *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, this theme is combined with the theme of lynching, while in the play *Blue Blood* it is linked to the lives of "ordinary" African Americans and, as some critics have noted, is presented in the form of a tragicomedy. This paper examines how the playwright developed these two themes, the extent to which the plays reflect the real lives of African Americans at the time they were written, and the extent to which they leave room for interpretation – by the reader or by a potential director. It also takes a brief look at the play *Paupaulekejo*, which deals with the relationship between a mixed-race African man and a white British woman.*

Keywords: *miscegenation; interracial relationships; mixed-race children; African-American literature; African-American women playwrights; Georgia Douglas Johnson.*

Many details of Georgia Douglas Johnson's biography remain unknown or unclear. She was born Georgia Blanche Douglas Camp sometime between 1877 and 1887 in Marietta or Atlanta (Atkins et al. 2015: 2). Her father was the wealthy and well-educated George Camp, who was of African-American and English descent, and her mother was Laura Douglas, who was half African American and half Native American. She did not know much about her father, as her mother quickly divorced him and then remarried twice. Some of her notes suggest a less than loving mother and a rather difficult childhood. She graduated from Atlanta University in 1896 and then she attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. In 1903 she married Henry Lincoln Johnson (1870–1925), a prominent lawyer and Republican politician, and the couple moved to Washington in 1910.

Georgia Douglas Johnson began composing music in 1898, and she started writing poetry and fiction probably around 1905. Four or five factors made it difficult for her to write and for her work to be properly critically evaluated. Apart from the fact that she was black and a woman, the problem was also that she was not fully black, i.e. she was of mixed race. She was married to a patriarchal man who believed that she should not write but should devote herself fully to the role of a mother and a housewife (Honey 2001: 230). Although she wrote during his lifetime, as harsh

as it sounds, her husband's death in 1925 opened up more space for her to write and promote her writing. In the late twenties, she travelled extensively, promoting her collections of poetry (*The Heart of a Woman*, 1918; *Bronze*, 1922; *An Autumn Love Cycle*, 1928¹) and giving lectures. It was at one of these promotional events in Cleveland that she met Charles Waddell Chesnutt, an important figure in the development of African-American literature. On the other hand, her husband's death also brought economic problems. She had to do several jobs to support herself and her two sons.

Despite all these problems and the fact that "she remained geographically removed from the major literary circles of her day, which were in Harlem" (Honey 2001: 230), she managed to become one of the most important artists of the Harlem Renaissance. According to her own 1963 "Catalogue of *Writings*," she wrote 200 poems, 28 plays, and 31 short stories. Unfortunately, most of her plays and stories were not published during her lifetime, and many have been lost. She received several awards for her poetry and her poems were included in school programmes. The play *Blue Blood* received an honourable mention in the 1926 Opportunity Playwriting Competition, and the play *Plumes* won in the same competition in 1927. These are the only two plays to be published and performed during her lifetime (at the Harlem Experimental Theatre, 1928–1931).

Besides being a major writer, she was also responsible for bringing together African-American writers and for providing some of them with material support. After her husband's death, she turned her Washington home into what she called the Saturday Salon, a place where writers and artists met every week to freely discuss the problems that preoccupied them. The most important names of the Harlem Renaissance passed through this salon – Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Anne Spencer, Richard Bruce Nugent, Alain Locke, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Eulalie Spence. The house at 1461 South Street NW later became known as the S Street Salon. The salon continued after the Second World War, and Georgia Douglas was particularly supportive of women writers. They often stayed in her house for a while (hence the third name – Half-Way House). The writers May Miller, Marita Bonner, Mary Burrill, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Angelina Weld Grimké owe much to this place.

In her plays, she dealt with themes "characteristic of African-American women playwrights up to 1950 – lynching, miscegenation, and the segregated military" (Barrios 2009: 195), as well as themes of poverty and the everyday hardships of African Americans. Georgia Douglas Johnson herself divided her 28 mostly one-act plays into four categories: "Primitive Life Plays," "Plays of Average Negro Life," "Lynching Plays," and "Radio Plays" (Stephens 2006: 2). 12 of them remain today, and editor Judith L. Stephens has divided them in a similar way. Her four categories are: "Primitive Life Plays" (*Blue Blood*, *Plums*), "Historical Plays" (*Frederick*

¹ Her fourth book of poetry *Share My World* was published in 1962.

Douglass, William and Ellen Craft), “Plays and Stories of Average Negro Life” (*Paupaulekejo, Starting Point*) and “Lynching Plays” (*A Sunday Morning in the South* – white church version; *A Sunday Morning in the South* – black church version; *Safe, Blue-Eyed Black Boy; And Yet They Paused; A Bill to Be Passed*).

The sexual relationship between two people of different races, and children who are of a mixed-race background, are themes that appear in the drama of the first category (*Blue Blood*), the fourth (*Blue-Eyed Black Boy*), and in some ways in the third one (*Paupaulekejo*). In one drama, the theme was used in connection with the subject of lynching, which was of particular interest to the author. According to the public records, as many as 3,589 blacks (including 83 women) were lynched between 1882 and 1927 (Barrios 2009: 195). Johnson fought against this through her plays, but also through social activism, as she was a member of The Writers’ League Against Lynching. She participated in the anti-lynching campaigns organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1936 and 1938. In the genre of anti-lynching drama, theorists say that G. D. Johnson has earned a name for herself.² In the second drama, *Blue Blood*, the issue of miscegenation is intertwined with the plight of “ordinary” African Americans in the first half of the 20th century. The third, which we will not discuss in detail here, touches on the issue of miscegenation between black Africans and the British colonisers.

The article does not aim to go into positivism and biographical details here; however, it should be noted that the theme of racial mixing probably entered this author’s work in large part because of her mixed-race background – white, black and Native American. The second reason is undoubtedly that the subject was topical at the time she wrote her one-act plays. It should be remembered that 31 American states had bans on interracial marriage until 1967, when the Supreme Court ruled that such laws “violated the Equal Protection Clause [adopted in 1868] of the United States Constitution” (*Loving v. Virginia* 1967).

In African-American drama, the most prominent treatment of the theme is found in the play *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* by Langston Hughes, produced on Broadway in 1935. The tragic story of Colonel Thomas Norwood, who lived on a plantation with his unmarried African-American wife for thirty years, and his conflict with his son Robert (whom he refuses to acknowledge, because Robert is “colored”), leading to murder, attempted lynching and suicide, could not have influenced Georgia Johnson’s dramas written in 1920 (*Paupaulekejo*), 1926 (*Blue Blood*) and 1930 (*Blue-Eyed Black Boy*). It is possible that it was the other way around, since Hughes frequently visited the weekly meetings at Johnson’s house. The production of Hughes’ play was both praised and criticized. Some critics claim

² “Johnson deserves recognition as the most prolific playwright of the lynching drama tradition and as the New Negro Renaissance artist whose work reflects an unprecedented and unrelenting devotion to the anti-lynching movement. Johnson’s lynching dramas are landmark contributions to both African-American theatre and American theatre in general.” (Stephens 2005: 87)

that it was an attack on mulatto stereotypes, others that it simply repeated and reinforced them. It is interesting to note that the word “mulatto” itself was later dropped from use as it was deemed offensive.

The two plays the paper is going to focus on here, although they do not belong to the same genre, begin and take place in the kitchen, in a space that was (at least at the time) feminine. The protagonists of the plays are women. The main events and the ensuing resolution happen because of their actions, not because of some external factors. Therefore, we can regard them as Afro-American women’s dramas that have a black woman at the centre. The main characters are older black women – Mrs. Waters in *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and Mrs. Bush in *Blue Blood*. Both have daughters who are getting married, and both are hiding the same secret.

Mrs. Waters’ situation is particularly interesting. In the very first scene, Georgia Douglas Johnson chooses to show how proud this woman is, how willing she is to talk about how she has lived a perfectly virtuous life: “REBECCA. ... every body in the Baptist Church looks up to us don’t they?”

MRS. WATERS. Sure they do. I ain’t carried myself straight all these years for nothing” (Johnson 1990: 47).

But this righteous woman has a secret, a sin that tortures her. The author chooses to transfer this sin symbolically to the physical plane, to the body. Mrs. Waters has stepped on a rusty nail, and now her future son-in-law, a doctor, is taking care of her, and she is not allowed to leave, that is, she is tied to a chair. One can read here an ironic reference to the ancient Greek myths of Achilles – a hero without a flaw, perfect and invulnerable, except for the heel by which his mother held him as she plunged him into the waters of the Styx River. A rusty nail went into Mrs. Waters’ heel and immobilized her.

And what is this heroine’s sin? This is the racial background of her blue-eyed son. From the conversation she has with her daughter, we learn that Rebecca is jealous of her brother Jack because of those eyes, but we also learn that he is the most popular boy in the neighbourhood precisely because of those eyes: “REBECCA. Every body says he’s the smartest and finest looking black boy in the whole town.

MRS. WATERS. Yes he is good looking if he is mine—some of em lay it to his eyes. (*She looks far off thoughtfully.*)

REBECCA. Yes, they do set him off—It’s funny he’s the only one in our family’s got blue eyes though. Pa’s was black and yours and mine are black too—It certainly is strange—I wish I’d had em” (Johnson 1990: 48).

When we talk about African-American literature, the first thing that comes to mind when someone mentions “blue eyes” is certainly Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. In this work, a young black girl dreams of blue eyes – if God gave her blue eyes, all her problems would be solved, starting with her physical appearance,

because she thinks she is very ugly. In the foreword to the novel, the author says that she was inspired by an event from her childhood, when a black friend wished she had blue eyes, which was the ideal of beauty at the time. She realized it was self-loathing, and the very idea repelled her: "I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish... Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was?... Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing" (Morrison 2007: X, XI).

We see something similar in these dramas. Jack is popular because he has blue eyes, which means that he is handsome because he has something that black people do not have and white people do. He approaches the ideal of beauty projected by a system that is, of course, constructed and enforced by white people. He inherited this "quality" from his father, but not the official, black one, but the real, secret, white one. When his life is threatened, this secret will save him. Jack has accidentally brushed against a white woman in the street, and she accuses him of assault. He is arrested, and a crowd of white men prepares to break into jail and lynch him. Only the governor can save him by sending in the state troops. It is clear from the mother's actions (or reaction) that actually the governor is his father: "MRS. WATERS. (*Feverishly tossing the odd bits of jewelry in the box, finally coming up with a small ring. She turns to Dr. Grey.*) Here Tom take this, run jump in your horse and buggy and fly over to Governor Tincher's house and don't let nobody—nobody stop you. Just give him the ring and say, Pauline sent this, she says they going to lynch her son born 21 years ago, mind you say twenty one years ago—then say—listen close—look in his eyes—and you'll save him." (1990: 49, 50)

It is not entirely clear what kind of relationship Pauline Waters and the Governor had, but since she has a ring that he probably gave her, it can be assumed that there was no coercion, i.e., that it was a normal, albeit hidden relationship. The governor's reasons for preventing the lynching could be concern for his son, but also fear of people finding out that Jack is his son, as this would certainly cost him his position. As I mentioned earlier, interracial relationships were virtually outlawed until 1967.

Mrs. Bush's daughter may not have blue eyes, but she does have "blue blood." The argument between Mrs. Bush, whose daughter May is about to marry, and Mrs. Temple, whose son John is about to marry May, about who will make the salad for the wedding turns into an argument about whose child is better: "MRS. TEMPLE. (breaking and stirring eggs for the dressing). You'll have to admit that the girls will envy May marrying my boy John.

MRS. BUSH. (stopping her work suddenly, and with arms akimbo). Envy MAY!!! Envy MAY!!! They'd better envy JOHN!!! You don't know who May is; she's got blue blood in her veins" (Johnson 1990: 41).

Where did May get this aristocratic blood? Well, it is the secret white father again, of course: "MRS. BUSH. Who is May? Huh! (Proudly tossing her head.)

Who is May? (Lowering her voice, confidentially.) Why ... do you know Cap'n WINFIELD McCALLISTER, the biggest banker in this town, and who's got money 'vested in banks all over Georgia? That 'ristocrat uv 'ristocrats... that Peachtree Street blue blood—CAP'N McCALLISTER—don't you know him?

... Well, I'd have you to know—he's May's daddy!

... Believe it or not, it's the bounden truth so help me God! Ain't you never seed him strut? Well, look at May. Walks jest like him—throws her head like him—an' she's got eyes, nose and mouth jest like him. She's his living image" (Johnson 1990: 41).

Mrs. Bush is so proud that her daughter's father is white (and rich) that she will claim that May "has got the bluest blood in America in her veins – I should say they don't come no finer than May, anywhere" (42). Aside from the fact that she has blue blood in her veins, her exceptionality is also visible from the outside, as her mother, speaking to May's ex-fiancé, says that May is "light" (39). Although it seems that being biracial will bring happiness to May, just as it brought Jack salvation from lynching, the situation is turned on its head, because John, her fiancé, also has a "secret" father, and that father is none other than Captain McCallister. So, they both have the same father, making them brother and sister. The constant concealment of the true condition of African Americans has brought them to the brink of incest.

The relationship that gave birth to John, and this is clearly stated in the play, was actually a rape, which is very strange for a tragicomedy, the genre in which this drama is usually classified: "MRS. TEMPLE. Once... I taught a country school in Georgia. I was engaged to Paul Temple... I was only nineteen. I had worked hard to make enough to pay for my wedding things... it was going to be in the early fall—our wedding. I put my money in the bank. One day, in that bank, I met a man. He helped me. And then I see he wanted his pay for it. He kept on—kept writing to me. He didn't sign his letters, though. I wouldn't answer. I tried to keep away. One night he came to the place where I boarded. The woman where I boarded—she helped him—he bribed her. He came into my room... I cried out. There wasn't any one there that cared enough to help me, and you know yourself, Mrs. Bush, what little chance there is for women like us, in the South, to get justice or redress when these things happen! Mother knew—there wasn't any use trying to punish him. She said I'd be the one... that would suffer" (1990: 43).

Not only does Mrs. Temple recount her traumatic case, but she also testifies to the situation of many black women in the South of the United States and how they cannot expect justice. This is why Heejung Cha defines these plays as realistic tragicomedies – "in that these plays portray actual, everyday lives of black people in a conventionally realistic manner with attention and without idealization or outrageous impostures" (Cha 2010: 158).

It is not clear how Mrs. Bush became pregnant, whether there was coercion or not. On the one hand, the fact that she brags about who the father of her daughter is, may tell us that it was not rape. On the other hand, she renounces him at the end (“God forgive me... God forgive that man. Oh, no... I don’t want Him to forgive him.” – 45), but it can also be a disappointment because he has fathered the child of another black woman. It is also interesting to note that there are two opposing sides fighting inside her – being proud of the biracial child and the relationship with a white man, and her desire to have a completely black son-in-law. She says to Dr. Randolph, who is in love with her daughter: “Oh! if she’d only listened to me, she’d be marrying you tonight, instead of that stuck up John Temple. I never did believe in two ‘lights’ marrying, nohow, it’s onlucky. They’re jest exactly the same color... hair... and eyes alike too. Now you... you is jest right for my May. ‘Dark should marry light.’ You’d be a perfect match” (39). Her statement seems to imply that she wanted to correct the mistake, that is, to “blacken” the white.

Coincidentally, she succeeds. The only solution to the given situation is for May (who has learned that her fiancé is actually her brother) to elope with Dr. Randolph Strong, even though she openly tells him: “But—I don’t love you.” (46). This is tempered somewhat by Mrs. Bush and Dr. Strong’s claims that May still has feelings for him, and her melancholy state before the wedding. However, in a drama that has also been categorized as a feminist drama, this resolution is rather odd, unless, of course, one reads it as a comedy.

As mentioned above, that particular play has been approached as a tragicomedy, and some authors, such as the aforementioned Heejung Cha, explain the “comic” in it at length and often philosophically. It also helps that the author herself has placed the drama in the group of “Primitive Life Plays” – and here one can read her distance from, perhaps even mockery of what she shows. However, it seems to us that Georgia Douglas has left the categorization of the play’s genre to the reader or a potential director. By emphasising some elements, such as the maternal boasting and the relationship between May and Randolph, and minimizing others, such as the story of Mrs Temple’s rape, the play can become a comedy. On the other hand, doing the opposite can turn it into a serious drama.

It should also be emphasized that it is not just that women in these plays are waiting for men to rescue them. The opposite process is at work, too. Because the women decide not to tell John who his father is, they save him (“he’ll kill his own father” – 45), and the situation brings to mind the black fathers of May and John, who never learned the name of the “real” father of their children. As the main character of the play says, a black woman has to save a black man from a white man: “Keep it from him. It’s the black women that have got to protect their men from the white men by not telling on ’em.” (46) This is certainly a feminist tone in the play.

Unlike some other authors who were clearly against racial miscegenation (in this sense, Olga Barrios writes about Myrtle Smith Livingston – 2009: 195), Georgia

Douglas' position in this regard is ambiguous, i.e., it seems to be neutral. However, the interpretations of the third play, which I will touch on briefly here, say otherwise. Indeed, C. C. O'Brien, analyzing the drama *Paupaulekejo*, concludes that: "Johnson imagines the cosmopolite of mixed race heritage as an ideal metaphor for pluralism and cultural syncretism" (2004: 572).

This is one of the few plays by Georgia Johnson that is not a one-act play, although it is close in length. She wrote it with Richard Bruce Nugent (1906–1987), a gay writer and painter who was also part of the Harlem Renaissance movement. It is not a very well written play. The motivation of the characters and plots seems unaccomplished, and Judith Stevens, who edited a collection of Johnson's plays, says that some part of the text is probably missing (Johnson 2006: 115). This drama is not about African Americans, but about Africans and their coexistence with the British. Namely, a young African chief (or king, as he calls himself), whose mother is a white British woman, falls in love with the daughter of a British missionary. The drama begins when she arrives in the village and admires the body of King Paupaul-kejejo. During the lessons she gives him, they fall in love.

But although O'Brien claims that Paupaulekejejo embodies "African masculinity that, moreover, contrasts sharply with Anglo-American masculinity and its history of incivility and racialized violence" (572), one should not lose sight of the end of the drama – Claire decides not to engage in this relationship, and Paupaul-kejejo kills her, then himself, saying: "We go same God. Your God, my God. We same there; we love there. Your heart, Claire, my heart. We go together!" (Johnson, Nugent 1920: 15) Although he does not try to change Claire, he even promises her that she will live as before, i.e., as she wants, the end of the drama, from the female perspective, once again brings violence against a woman, by a man – be he black, white, or "mixed."

In conclusion, the article highlights that Georgia Douglas Johnson gave a realistic view of miscegenation and mixed-race characters in her plays. She neither celebrated nor attacked miscegenation, but tried to show all the real problems that such people experienced/or experience and all the traumas that such relationships can bring. This playwright "used theater to speak out against social injustices" (Beaulieu 2006: 484), showing all the hardships that African Americans had to endure, but she did not spare them from criticism, suggesting that to some extent they themselves accepted such a position. And all this was done by skilfully using elements of different dramatic genres – comedy, melodrama, and serious drama.

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