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The Analysis of Cleo's Character in West's "The Living Is Easy"

تحليل شخصية كليو في رواية "العيش السهل" للكاتبة ويست

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المخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليل شخصية البطلة في رواية "الحياة سهلة". للكاتبة الامريكية دوروثي ويست. بطلة هذا العمل الأدب شخصية أدبية مختلفة في الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي في القرن العشرين، عصر النهضة في هارلم. في خلال هذه الفترة، تم قبول الأفارقة كأفراد مستقلين في المجتمع الأمريكي. وهذا يدعم اعتقاد جريف بأن "الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي أصبح الآن في مرحلة مختلفة ... مع شخصيات سوداء قوية ومستقلة ... (62). على عكس ذلك، تم تقديم كليو كامرأة سوداء مع حقيقة ملتوية مفادها أنها تبدو وكأنها تتصرف كشخص أبيض، ولكن ليس كأنثى حقًا. لذلك، يصور المؤلف بطلة يمكن أن تكون أي واحد منا، إنسان من أي جنس؛ امرأة من أي عرق. وعليه، فإن هذا العمل الأدبي ليس مثل الأعمال الأمريكية الأفريقية الشائعة الأخرى التي تدور موضوعاتها حول العبودية أو تأثير العبودية على الجيل القادم. إنما يتعلق هذا العمل بهؤلاء السود الذين يفرون من جنوب الولايات المتحدة إلى شمالها من أجل الحصول على حياة مزدهرة، تمامًا مثل الحياة الفاخرة التي يعيشها الناس البيض في ذلك الوقت. بطلة الكاتبة ويست تريد البحث عن "... حياة مختلفة عن حياة والديها" (باي:203). في هذه الورقة العلمية، تقوم الباحثتان بالتحقيق في هذا النوع الجديد من البطلات الأمريكيات من الأصل الأفريقي اللواتي بدت وكأنها ضحية لنفسها ومعتقداتها وذلك من خلال إنكار كونها شخصًا أسودًا وأنثى نموذجية.

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Abstract

This study analyzes the heroine character in Dorothy West's novel, *The Living Is Easy*. This heroine is a different literary character in the African American literature of the twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance. During this period, African people had been accepted as independent individuals in the American society. This supports Greve's belief that "African American literature is now at a different stage...with strong and independent black characters..." (62). On the contrary, Cleo is presented as a black woman with a twist fact that she appears to behave as a white person, but not truly as a female. Therefore, the author depicts a protagonist who could be any one of us, a human of any gender; a woman of any race. Accordingly, this literary work is not like other common African American works in which its themes are about slavery or the impact of slavery over the coming generation. It is about those blacks who escape from the south to the north of the United States in order to have a prosperous life, just like the luxurious life of white people at that time. West's protagonist wants to search "...for a different life from their parents" (Bay: 203). In this paper, we investigate this new type of an African American heroine who appeared to be a victim of herself and her norms by denying both, being a black person and a typical feminine.

In *The Living Is Easy* novel, West does not present a life of a character; instead, she explores the psychological struggle of maintaining a good example of powerful white lady who is against her nature of being feminine and black. The protagonist, Cleo, is an model of black women who highlights "the defense and improvement of African-American womanhood" (West: 192). Through denying the nature of her gender and race, she depicts a complex character because she is different from women

of the same color. During the phase of 1920s and 1930s, the concept of feminism was not very popular. So, Cleo is a kind of a character who challenges herself and others to define herself by being distinguished from her sisters, minority women and women of her gender as well. Accordingly, this is very ironic because her attention of self-discovery leads her to an identity denial. She is trying hard to recreate herself, but why does she do that?!

According to my experience in this field, there could be two reasons: first, black people suffered a lot from racism over years in the past, so the older generation retell their painful stories about such segregation. This might have made Cleo ignores these memories; because according to her prejudice, this makes her feel weak and enhances her self-hatred. Secondly, the Harlem Renaissance phase was a time when African American people started to move to the north of the United States for the sake of both, racial pride and equality. It is an intellectual movement that has accepted the new black cultural identity in the canon. Thus, they started to form their own art, music and literature among the white community. This creation of those two cultures occupy the same territory. Different races, sexualities, genders, classes were literary found in a society like a melting pot. Therefore, West provides a heroine who wants to be everything (perfect) in the eyes of "others". On the other hand, this leads her to her downfall at the end of the novel.

According to Tajfel and Turner, the world is divide into two groups, "us" and "them". So, any one of us belongs to one of those two social categories. Nonetheless, Cleo is a combination of those two divisions. Consequently, West portrays her heroine in a complicated persona because she does not apply the norm of the social identity theory hypothesis in which the in-group "us" search for negative traits against the out-group "them" to improve her self-image. Rather, she is against herself as a black woman and defines herself as others, a white lady who appears to be high-powered by performing some masculine attitude.

In "This Plague of Their Own Locusts': Space, Property, and Identity in Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy*," Johnson categorizes West's protagonist as the "it" girl. He views this kind of girl as "an empowering

model for feminist and racial progress" (609). West starts her novel with some childhood memories. Cleo's strong personality was clear since her childhood days, she was very powerful girl. She displayed characteristics such as aggressiveness and competitiveness which do not belong to her feminine gender. When she played with her friend, Josie, she challenged her to ride the horse, "He can't tromp me! I ain't ascairt of nothing alive" (14). Accordingly, West presents her as a person who lacks weakness in a moment of fear, "She felt no fear, feeling only power beneath her and the power inside her..." (West: 14).

The advantage of introducing this kind of character is best interpreted by Sanders, "One positive result of West's creating a 'masculine,' black, female protagonist in the late 1930s and 1940s is that Cleo's complex figure rises above the frequently portrayed literary stereotypes of black females who tend either to be depicted as passive, cooperative, maternal 'Mammies'..." (436). Accordingly, the presentation of Cleo's character is "new to black literature" (Cromwell: 361), and it is a "new type of African American heroine" (Johnson: 611). Castenell declares that Cleo is a female character who is close to mythic; he considers her as a different type from those traditional female figures.

Cleo has been regarded as a complex figure by many critics. Her complexity is represented by displaying her contradictory qualities throughout the novel: good and bad, kind and wild, self-denial and self-definition, and strong and weak. In fact, Cleo portrays some good characteristics such as helping people who are in need. There are many examples that prove this quality such as, providing her sisters with money; she listens to Thea, and tries to offer her help; and assists Lenore when she wants to marry Simon. But, if the reader looks from another perspective, Cleo's negative qualities are clearly shown when she invites her sisters to live with her, she has stopped assisting them. Instead, she destroys their married lives.

by being a facilitator in Lenore and Simon's marriage she shows a paradox of her acceptance of married life; and by promising Thea to beat and call the police for Duchess, Cleo sympathizes with her because she is not all white. This shows contrast because, throughout the novel, she is

denying her race. Cleo is depicted as the "it" girl because she hopes to perform this type of persona without understanding the inherent contradictions of the role. Thus, the paradoxes that West employ, increases complexity which requires the reader to analyze this type of character psychologically in order to understand the reasons behind her attitude and behavior.

Mollinger in his preface to Psychoanalysis & Literature: An Introduction, says that "Since both man's personality and man's literature are complex, differing psychoanalytic and critical theories must be explored, and taken seriously..." (x). Sanders confirms that the complex presentation of Cleo, "who along with her racial denial and class elitism, is angry and frustrated over the limitations ... over on women's lives" (435). Her identity goes beyond the restrictions of her gender. One of the reasons is that she does not comprehend those limitations of being female. Cleo is the only one, among her sisters, whose mother is worried about her. "...She wasn't a child that would listen to reason. Whatever she didn't want to hear went in one ear and out the other" (16). The narrator expresses Cleo's performance of roles beyond her gender in a very poetic language, "The wildness was in her, the unrestrained joy, the desire to run to the edge of the world and fling her arms around the sun, and rise with it, through time and space, to the center of everywhere" (West: 13). Cleo cheats and lies "in order to remain at center of [the] world" (qtd. in Johnson: 620). She wants to be the center of attention in the eyes of herself and others. Castenell also regards her as a strong survivor, the "bitch," who is the center of her own world (147).

However, the complexity is not shown in Cleo's childhood, but it is recalled to contrast with her present life. Memories "deriv[ed] from personal unconscious and the handling of the unconscious forces to childhood, to wishes, and to conflict" (Mollinger: 62). On the other hand, flashbacks, according to Sanders, presents Cleo's longing for time when she had the ability to be both feminine and masculine. Reminding her past empowers her and makes her feel complete. On Christmas day, she goes into the room and looks for something, she felt that "Something was missing

in the room...That thing was a sense of oneness. Now some part of her felt severed, her self-identity with her child" (West: 222).

Sanders indicates that West uses flashback as a means for the reader to understand the formation of the protagonist's personality. Her recall provides a contradicted image of the place, being in the north and longing for her sisters in the south. Therefore, Cleo defines herself as a black woman through her memories of the south, and here she admits her black identity unconsciously. Wilks emphasizes that West uses this in order to show contrasts of her protagonist. Accordingly, she uses it "...not to highlight Cleo's devotion to her family, but to reveal the character's ambivalent and often conflicted relationship to it" (572).

Generally speaking, women are very sensitive and affectionate by nature, but Cleo opposes her genders nature and refuses to reveal her feelings. Many times she escapes from moments of love and kindness. For instance, she prevents her husband from getting close to her, "His devotion to his wife and child was like an aura around them. Cleo felt her throat contract with a strange compassion, and she could not bear the emotion that made her see his singleness of heart. She tore herself away from him lest she reveal her understanding and return his tenderness" (81).

Even in joyful moments, Cleo hides her feelings as if it is a sign of weakness. At Charismas, when her nephew, niece, and daughter tell her about their presents, she does not want them to "have a close view of the naked face of her happiness" (West: 221). She resembles the father who is a black man with a black heart, as she claims. According to psychoanalysts, the blackness of the heart symbolizes the coldness of emotions. After being married for one year, and when the battle of sex began, West describes her as being "ice" where "Neither her mouth nor her body moved to meet him" (35). "Cleo?" His voice was soft, with the little hunger behind it. His body rolled toward her. She raced like a deer for the darkness. And slept" (155). This example shows the gender roles of masculine and feminine are crossed. He is applying softness while the coldness of her heart makes her harsh. According to her, her rejection towards her husband would make her remain strong and "protect[ing] her individual power" (Sanders: 439).

Cleo has never been physically weak except the moment when she had her daughter. Even in that moment, she tried to maintain her strength, but the action of labor was stronger than her. "...She conceived a child on a night when her body's hunger broke down her controlled resistance" (West: 35). However, Cleo does not care if she sacrifices her sexual life, she only cares about maintaining her power and this is more important to her. Sanders interprets Cleo's rejection of sexuality as an advantage, that "she never runs the risk of being destroyed either morally or physically by her sexuality," which is "the literary fate of many black women" (439).

Cleo is aware of herself as being different from other females around her, such as her friend and her three sisters. An example which shows the difference is her insistence on winning the fight with the boy, while "Her sisters circled [the boy and Cleo], crying and wringing their hands" (20). When Cleo was a child she, "wasn't afraid of the biggest boy or the fiercest dog, or the meanest teacher. She could sass back. She could do anything" (15-16). She is "intelligen[t] and cruel[ty]," who portrays the image of the "larger-than-life character" (West: 147). Therefore, by displaying masculine features, she is trying "to seize the social power that is denied to females" (Sanders: 437).

As Cleo grows up, her mother's fear grows. The daughter becomes wilder, and her mother sends her to the north for self-discipline in order to prevent "The wildness in [this] child [from] turn[ing] to wantonness..." (West: 24). The change occurs, but unfortunately it is temporary. "This was the period of instruction that was preparation for adulthood. Yet she knew she was not changing. She merely learn[ed] guile" (23). However, she starts to learn how to speak and behave like a Bostonian, which is not a negative transformation as long as proper behavior is learned. But, Cleo does not transform into a positive person. Being in Boston adds more complexity to her personality. Moreover, this allows her to be a selfish woman whose aim is self-centered and others-control.

One of Cleo's childhood best memory is when she plays with her bicycle. The movement of her bicycle works as a literary metaphor. As West expresses it "She pedaled away as easily as if she had been cycling all her life..." (31). Her mobility of self-improvement has been stopped when

her bicycle crashed. But owing a bicycle, at least, is a sign of "the independence of New Womanhood" (Johnson: 618). When her new bicycle has been destroyed, Judson, her husband, sees her crying over her it, but he is unable to help. This is a sign that Judson won't be able to help her to improve herself while he lives with her. This makes her marriage life worse. He tries his best, but Cleo is the one who prevents "the wheels [from] go[ing] round" (West: 344).

Cleo wants to be a free person; not by destroying the chains of slavery, but by living as a proud, rich and independent (black) woman. When she and her only daughter, Judy walk to the market, the former "walk[s] carefully over the cobblestones that tortured her toes in her stylish shoes, was jealous of all the free-striding life around her wits" (70). If Cleo had been mature enough before marrying Judson, she would have refused him and remained single for the rest of her life. So, Cleo had false thoughts of marrying Judson, "She had been ignorant enough at eighteen to think she was marrying an old man who would leave her a rich young widow" (144). Cleo's sister, Charity, admits to her that "[she] married money, and I married love" (West: 177). Therefore, she is unlike the common black women who are presented in the African American literature. Naturally, Those black females are obedient not only to their husbands, but also to their fate. Yes, Cleo is different. She does not marry for the sake of security or even love, she marries for her own purposes, her selfishness. "...Characterizations that often echoed the rhetoric of true black womanhood, Cleo's prioritization of self over community reads as aberrant" (Wilks: 570).

Wilks points out that the ignorance of sexual advances deprives Judy, Cleo's daughter, from having siblings. Here, she rejects two roles at the same time. According to him, by not performing the role of wife and mother, Cleo "fails to fulfill the ideals of New Negro womanhood" (573). Therefore, Cleo's dreams are beyond being a typical black woman. According to her, in order to gain her dignity, she must be the controller of everything. She exercises her authority hoping to assist others to her will. Unfortunately, she labors under this illusion. Her daughter, Judy who likes to observe, is the one who notices her mother desire to be the master of

herself and of other people who live around her. On the contrary, others accept this fact as if it is a natural behavior. "It was funny, but Cleo was the boss of everybody. It was like she was the boss of the house" (West: 202). Moreover, she is "the boss of nothing but the young, the weak, the frightened" (308). This depicts the role of the "it" girl who displays qualities of power, but in reality she is not. It "remains a decorative accoutrement dependent on and enabled by the masculine authority..." (Johnson: 609).

Her authority in her house resembles the world of business; here, she absolutely displays masculine world. Cleo's limited opportunities of exposure to the business world make her regard the house as a commercial place. When her sister, Serena, asks her how she is going to live "in Mr. Judson's house," she cries angrily, "It's my house...[Brat] runs his store, I run my house without interference" (West: 184). Wilks uses the word "domain" to refer to Cleo's house because "Cleo would be king, not mother" (573). Moreover, Cleo shows her authority through her angry tone and thinks that if she is not taking care of the house (business), it will be in a complete mess, "...If I turn my back for a second, this house runs on three wheels" (West: 223).

Through Cleo's experiences living in the new house, West creates an irony, the use of a language that means the opposite. Cleo thinks that by transferring into a different neighborhood, her pride will increase. Actually, Cleo and other colored people live in Roxbury. But, Cleo thinks and convinces herself that her house is in Brookline, a great part in Boston where high-class white people live. Even though this reality disappoints her, she continues claiming that her house is located in Brookline.

Johnson notes that Cleo advertizes the address of the house as Brookline, but it is reverted to Roxbury as soon as people of color inhabits the area. Her self-denial occurs when her unconscious mind prevents her from being aware of the realistic truth that exists around her. A British psychologist defines self-denial as the "renouncing one's own interests in favor of the interests of others" (Besley: 377), and this is what Cleo is doing. She is not renouncing her interests in favor of others, but she is suppressing what is best for her due to her pride. Her obsession of being a

Bostonian lady leads her to deny herself as an *African American woman*. What all she cares of is behaving and living as a typical Bostonian. Because Boston has a history of abolition and intellectualism, Johnson claims that this state offers a space where black people have the ability to establish "social and economic parity" (611). Accordingly, West represents the tenseness which resulted from "interracial and class discrimination among the upper and working class black communities of early 20th-century Boston" (612).

Cleo does not confine her obsessive Bostonian behavior to herself, but she forces it onto her daughter. When Judy grins at a little white dog, her mother tells her not to show her gums when she smiles, and orders her to "...Sit like a little Boston Lady" (West: 39). Her daughter's exhibition of her happiness annoys her because the color of her daughter's gum reminds her identity of being a black woman. As an excuse, she hopes that it is only "a phase of growth". She thought to herself that, "A proper Bostonian never showed any emotion but hauteur" (39-40). Although Cleo hires Thea to teach Judy the principles of Bostonian behavior, she keeps behaving spontaneously and her mother has to remind her each time how to behave perfectly like Northern whites.

Cleo instructs not only her daughter, but also her sisters' children. She wants to convey the image of completeness even to her extended family. She tells them what to do if somebody calls them "nigger." She regards herself as the "only [one who] care[s] to see them [the children] walk proud" (West: 228). Although Cleo does her best to portray the image of being a Bostonian, she ultimately knows that she is not this type of woman. In a moment she feels that her daughter belongs to her, but then she directly separates her from her belonging, "...I can see her will to belong to herself. I want her to be a Bostonian, but I want her to be me deep down" (141). The word "but" shows the contrast and the admission of her fake reality that defines her power.

However, Johnson indicates that the Black bourgeoisie's search for living in Boston space makes them believe that such a space provides them protection and secure. When they achieve this, they believe that they are no longer southern blacks, but northern, proud people. Miss Eliot is another

Bourgeoisie black woman, but she admits her origin, unlike Cleo. So, she represents the two sides of a coin by stating that she belongs to Boston society and at the same time she admits her African race and roots:

With so many of the unfortunates of our race migrating to Boston, we find ourselves becoming crusaders for our beloved city. We may soon be outnumbered by the South-Enders, or worse, diminished in the estimation of our better whites who hardly thought of us as colored before their coming. We Bostonians have been a little hidebound. But now we are eager to open our ranks to whoever will help us in our fight for survival.

(West: 172)

The notion of true womanhood "caused black *women* to prove they were *ladies* and "forced White *ladies* to prove that they were *women*" (qtd. 570, original italics), Wilks observes that women of color "struggle to come full circle, that is, to shed the constraints of a protected 'lady-hood' for the freedom of an empowered woman-hood" (570). Accordingly, this is what Cleo is doing; she struggles to be free, perfect, and powerful lady. In contrast to her reality, she fails to be the person she wants. She rejects her feminine nature, being a wife and a mother. Consequently, her hate towards female gender restrictions leads her to her downfall at the end of the novel because, as she believes, prevents her from reaching the role-model that she wants to be.

West surprises the reader towards the end of her novel by creating a plot change where Judson, Cleo's husband, loses all of his money. Although this is the first time Judson becomes weak, he is able to make a strong decision, departing the house. So, Cleo, is supposed to be stronger than before because she has no more external obstacles that prevent her to achieve her independence. Instead, Cleo tried her best to convince her husband to stay, but she does not succeed. As a result, any reader would notice that the strong image of Cleo's character disappears. At that moment, her husband change allows her to be a dynamic character who is ready to change his identity. For the first time in the novel, she does not care about money, "She did not want the money" (344). For the first time, she admits

that she could play the role of wife, "You need a wife to look out for you. Let me go with you" (345). And, for the first time, she accepts her husband's smell of fruit, "She lifted her face to his...her own eyes luminous with tenderness" (346).

What happens towards the end could be interpreted by two ways. First, she becomes the loser, and this is "...What happens to a woman who dares to defy gender roles and spheres" (Sanders: 436). Therefore, some critics view her as a tragic heroine who ends up the victim of her pride and self-denial. Her reaction, when her husband decided to leave her alone at the end of the novel, is a great example which assures her ultimate downfall. Second, her husband's departure gives her a chance to change and be the kind of woman who accepts her gender. Accordingly, she gains knowledge and experience from her destruction.

Cleo realizes that her manipulation of people around her does not make her triumphant at the end. According to Mollinger, the use of the external is regarded as a creative process. If she is going to learn from her mistakes, she will not be a tragic hero; instead, she would be regarded as a creative person, "Though creativity is seen as a way of restitution for destructive urges, the positive aspect of creation is more in focus here" (20).

The novel is open-ended, leaving additional possibilities for Cleo to change available. She is no longer willing to be the controller in the house. "Men were her enemies because they were male" (West: 38) at the beginning of the story; now she wishes her nephew, Tim, "...to be the man of the house" (347). Cleo's self-awareness at last is very important because it works against her self-denial which she tries to achieve throughout the novel. West hints at Cleo's self-awareness in couple places in the "The Living Is Easy" in order to set up a flexible ending, "...The possibility of Bart's [Judson, her husband] coming back remains. There is hope at the end..." (Sanders: 444). Wilks notes that the end of this novel is positive because Cleo starts to achieve her gender completeness. Her double identity, being female and portraying male characteristics, is the reason behind her complexity. Once her transformation starts, she is, of course, no longer a complicated character.

The title, "The Living Is Easy," appears to be very ironic. Because Judson is "the best provider," Cleo's husband existence presents her external struggle which adds more to her inner struggle, accepting her identity (West: 344). She admits that to him when she says, "You don't know how I brag to my sister about the living you gave me" (154). There is an only one page in the novel where West hints or uses the same words of her novel's title. According to Cleo, the easiness of the living occurs when money is existed. Without any doubt, the heroine wants to enjoy her life and spend money. "But while we're all alive and young, and the living is easy, I can't invite my own sisters to spend one week in my house" (154). Once her husband leaves the house, her life becomes difficult because there is no money any more. Rodgers thinks that "The Living Is Easy" does not mean the ease of the middle-class world; instead, it signifies a relation with "the idyllic southern paradise depicted in the plaintive lines of "Summertime," where one is sheltered by protective parents and cooperative nature" (169).

The life is no longer easy for Cleo. She is the "it" girl who is not strong because of the absence of "the masculine authority" and "She is the princess who can never be king" (Johnson: 609). Now, she has a real opportunity to become be the controller; as her husband admits it, "You are the boss now" (344). Cleo in "The Living Is Easy" sets a different example for African American womanhood. Her sudden loss of her husband and money teaches her a lesson that through the acceptance of one's reality, he/she can be strong and proud. Although her downfall at the end seems to be negative, it represents positive opportunity to be a new person who is no longer denying herself-hood nor her gender. West's ending provides a new start for Cleo to rebuild her life and define herself who remained unknown for a long time.

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