

Internalized Racial Oppression in Teresa Ann Willis' *Like A Tree Without Roots*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v23i2.462>

Abeer Fathi Ahmed Ibrahim, Maha Mostafa Hosney and Iman El-Sayed
Raslan
Helwan University

Received on 18.9.2022

Accepted on 13.4.2023

Published on 20.6.2023

Abstract: Internalized racial oppression is a multi-dimensional interdisciplinary phenomenon that plagues many ethnic groups in America. However, little attention has been given to this race-based issue. The aim of this research paper is to highlight internalized racial oppression as a socio-psychological phenomenon in the novel of the African American writer Teresa Ann Willis' *Like A Tree Without Roots* which is a story of suffering as well as of healing. In this young adult fiction, the protagonist is subjected to an internalized set of values that creates its own cycle of victimization leading to feelings of self-hatred, self-doubt and disrespect for her race and herself. An integral part of this culture is the White standards of beauty. The paper unravels the severe psychological effects of the internalization of Western beauty standards on the identity formation of African American teen girls. The paper focuses on oppression theory in relation to sociology and psychology to analyze the novel understudy. In addition, Liberatory/critical consciousness will be tackled as a concept in the educational system that proves to be highly important to fully comprehend this phenomenon of internalized racial oppression.

Keywords: internalized racial oppression, liberatory/critical consciousness, Teresa Ann Willis, Western beauty standards, young adult literature

I. Introduction

Internalized racial oppression refers to the incorporation and the acceptance of the negative stereotypes, the negative self-images and beliefs about one's race. (Pyke 2010: 553) It is a social phenomenon that has its psychic impact upon the especially oppressed African Americans. In "What is Internalized Oppression", Karen D. Pyke, a prominent professor in the field of sociology, argues that the study of the internalization of racial oppression by its victims namely the racially subordinated or minority groups and its subsequent racial inequality reflects "a taboo". (2010: 551) For this reason, Pyke believes that in order to dismantle white privileges and advance antiracist knowledge, we need to make racism visible and uncover the silence surrounding the topic because the silence contributes to incomplete knowledge of the hidden injuries of racism. (2007:102)

The aim of this research paper is to highlight internalized racial oppression as a socio-psychological phenomenon in Teresa Ann Willis' *Like A Tree Without Roots* (2013). The paper examines the internal dynamics and the hidden injuries of oppression in relation to African American teen girls as represented in the narrative. In this young adult fiction, the protagonist

suffers from an internalized set of values that victimizes her and leads to feelings of self-hatred, self-doubt and disrespect for her race and herself. The set of values surrounding African American teens are the outcome of a whole culture which favors whiteness. The white standards of beauty are also examined as tools of racial oppression that negatively affect the identity of African American teen girls. Because Afro-American young adult literature has been interested in confronting “the white cultural oppression”(Rountree 2008:43), the paper proves that young adult literature is very functional in exposing fundamental teen problems and in solving such issues as internalized racial oppression. In fact, Afro-American young adult literature plays an important role in exposing issues related to ethnic identity. It is a suitable medium to discuss the African-American experiences as well as the place of the blacks in the American society. It can prove to be a valuable tool in revealing the struggle and suffering of the teens of the African American community regarding issues that relate to their race and identity.(Collins 1993: 378)

The paper depends on a number of disciplines to capture the different angles of this phenomenon. A basic theory to capture internalized racial oppression as a socio-psychological phenomenon is oppression theory in relation to sociology and psychology. It is important to place internalized oppression within the context of oppression theory in sociology because it helps understand how internalized oppression is maintained and perpetuated. It can also help to understand how systems of inequality, in general, are reproduced. Oppression theory in psychology (psychology of oppression) gives deep and comprehensive insights to what happens psychologically to the differently positioned individuals within these systems whether those who benefit from oppression ‘oppressors’ or those who are ‘oppressed’. (Teomm K. Williams 2012: 17)In addition, social justice education as a field of study that aims at achieving “equal participation of all groups in a society” (Bell 1997: 1) is fundamental to the analysis of the novel. Educators address issues related to race, gender, ethnicity and class especially inequality and injustices. Liberatory/critical consciousness which enables individuals to maintain awareness to resist oppression is a concept developed in the educational system that proves to be highly important to fully comprehend this phenomenon of internalized racial oppression.

Young adult literature, a genre that is meant for readers between the ages of 12 to 20 and which gained much acceptance in the last few years, is becoming a powerful means to address important issues. Baxley and Boston believe that, as a dynamic and ever-evolving term, young adult literature “has come to be defined as realistic fiction that examines contemporary, real-world problems common to young readers”. (2014: 4) Young adult literature has become, in the last few years, “a powerful literary category rich with diverse genres and cross-generational appeal”. (Girandi and G. Scheg 2018:1) Latham and Gross (2014: 5) state that with the increase of the number of multicultural authors, more books about multicultural young adults are published. African American authors published books that “reflect America’s diverse culture and gave voice to those who previously had been greatly underrepresented in young adult literature”. Thus, the racially marginalized and unheard groups are given voice in this literature. Ethnic authors of young adult

literature write books that represent the teen culture, issues and hopes of their race. Some of the main issues addressed in young adult literature include identity problems, racism, bullying, drug addiction, homelessness, sex, alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, peer pressure and homosexuality.

One of the issues related to identity problems in relation to race addressed in young adult literature is the internalized racial oppression which is also called “internalized racism,” “internalized White supremacy,” “internalized Whiteness,” and “racial self-hatred”. (Panlay 2016:2) It is the acceptance of the negative stereotypes, the negative self-images and beliefs about one’s race. Pyke (2010: 553) defines it as “the individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one’s racial group”. In this case, victims of internalized oppression view themselves through the eyes of dominant groups. They view themselves as inferior subjects, less human and unimportant.

According to theory of oppression in sociology, there are two important tenets for internalized racial oppression. Firstly, it is a product of oppression. This means that the continuous socialization within oppressive systems makes the perpetuation and reproduction of oppression possible. Thus, internalized oppression is an “inevitable” condition of oppressive structures. (Pyke 2010: 553) Oppressive systems create social hierarchy in society. The existence of the binary oppositions of oppressed or oppressor, dominant or subordinate, superior or inferior, are not innate to human existence; instead, they reflect the roles assigned to individuals by systems of oppression. As such, internalized racial oppression is a fundamental aspect of oppressive systems. Therefore, it is important to note that the acceptance of minority groups of their status as inferior is the outcome of living under systems of oppression. Secondly, internalized racial oppression is essential for the maintenance of oppression and White supremacy and dominance. Through the process of internalizing oppression, members of subordinate groups behave and function in ways that support and maintain an oppressive status quo. They believe that they are inferior and White people are superior, thereby ensuring the maintenance and reproduction of oppression.(Pyke 2007: 105) Thus, internalized racial oppression is built around the idea that what is White is better and superior. Dominant groups benefit from the existence of internalized racial oppression because it reflects the idea of their superiority.

Hence, internalized racial oppression does not reflect any weakness, failure or negative psychological trait in the oppressed. It is, instead, a reflection of their oppression. Internalized racial oppression, thus, is the most subtle form of racism. It affects oppressed groups in severe psychological ways. Psychologists reveal it as an internal psychological process that involves feelings, actions and has its psychological consequences. Psychologist Geraldine Moane (2003:13) emphasizes that oppression has a negative impact on many areas such as self and identity, as well as many other areas of psychological functioning. Similarly, S.L. Speight (2007: 126) of the field of counseling psychology asserts that the internalization of racism is “a key piece of the puzzle necessary for elucidating psychological injury that is due to racism”. Suzanne Lipsky (1987: 6) asserts that black internalized

oppression is the result of the racism and oppression of the majority of society upon other groups. She asserts that though experienced in different ways, each one of us, as blacks, has been profoundly hurt by this particular manifestation of oppression. No black person in this society has been spared. (Lipsky 1987: 144) She confirms: patterns of internalized racism have caused us [as Blacks] to accept many of the stereotypes of Blacks created by the oppressive majority society. We have been taught to be angry at, ashamed of, anything that differs too much from a mythical idea of the middle class of the majority culture—skin that is “too dark,” hair that is “too kinky,” dress, talk, and music that is “too loud.” (Lipsky 1987: 146)

Speaking about its devastating effects on the black community, Lipsky (1987: 146) maintains that internalized racism “has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and “agree” to our own oppression. It has been a major factor preventing us, as black people, from realizing and putting into action the tremendous intelligence and power that in reality we possess”. Lipsky (1987: 145) believes that patterns of oppression lead to distress upon the oppressors themselves and upon those whom the oppressors have control and power (e.g children). Such racial oppression results in self-invalidation, self-doubt, isolation, fear, feelings of powerlessness and despair.

Teresa Ann Willis’ debut novel is an example of young adult literature that deals with the issues of identity problems and racism. It is also considered a perfect example in which internalized racial oppression is at the center of the narrative. Willis is an author and a transformative educator. She has established a private middle-school in Harlem called “Middle Passage”. She has dedicated her life to engage marginalized children and youth to education in schools. Willis has also worked as a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Morning Call* newspapers. (in a note in *Like A Tree Without Roots* 2013: n.p) *Like A Tree Without Roots* explores the inner conflict of Jasmine who is a victim of oppression. Through Jasmine’s hatred of her blackness, Willis reveals the issue of the internalization of oppression in relation to the African American young adults which assures the continuity of race among the racialized groups in America. Besides, the novel displays how cultural ideals based on skin color and physical features function as tools of racial oppression that affect negatively African American teenagers whose identity is in the process of formation. The view about the self as deserving the low statuesque goes hand in hand with the whites’ standards of beauty held on the basis of difference between whites and blacks.

Willis presents internalized racial oppression as a social phenomenon and a psychological issue. She reveals that when oppression is perpetuated in society, it becomes internalized, accepted and rarely questioned by the oppressed. When they internalize oppression, members of oppressed groups accept the negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about themselves. They see themselves as inferior and deserving their low status quo. This self-oppressive attitude hurts its members psychologically. Pyke emphasizes that internalized oppression results due to unequal systems based on the superiority of the whites over other minority groups.

According to her, like all forms of internalized domination, internalized oppression is:

Not the result of some cultural or biological characteristic of the subjugated. Nor is it the consequence of any weakness, ignorance, inferiority, psychological defect, gullibility, or other shortcoming of the oppressed. The internalization of oppression is a multidimensional phenomenon that assumes many forms and sizes across situational contexts, including the intersections of multiple systems of domination. It cannot be reduced to one form or assumed to affect similarly located individuals or groups in precisely the same way. It is an inevitable condition of all structures of oppression. (Pyke 2010: 553)

In the novel, Jasmine's internalized oppression in relation to her race is a response to direct racial discrimination she experiences. She is surrounded by an oppressive society that defines a person on the basis of skin color rather than the content of character. Her self-loathing in relation to her race is the result of a long history of oppression by her white peers. The dark-skinned Jasmine used to be teased for being so black. In the elementary school, she was always ridiculed and called names to her face. She recalls:

I always thought it was stupid when kids called me an African since they knew I was African American born right here in Harlem. But all throughout elementary school, it was the same thing every day: "Oooohhh, you dirty, wipe that dirt off your face." Or, "Tar baby." Or, "She burnt." Or "Bead-a-bead." And when they were really trying to be hateful, "African booty scratcher! (Willis 2013: 3-4)

Jasmine was also ignored and made fun of unlike her friend, Ebonee, who has white skin. Because of her dark skin, Jasmine got no attention. She describes her hard experience in middle school as follows:

middle school was treacherous. It was hard being around her [Ebonee]. She got all the attention and I got ignored or made fun of. But not like in elementary school when kids called you names to your face. Now they talked about you behind your back, but that was worse, really, since you never knew who you could trust. (Willis 2013: 30)

Jasmine was always marginalized and pointed as different due to her African features. The repetitive exposition to racism and oppression when she was young is the reason of her self-oppression as a teenager. She was always seen as dirty, black and ugly, and these attitudes remained with her until she grew up. Thus, no wonder that Jasmine internalizes oppression in relation to her race that results into feelings of self-hatred. She tries to detach herself from her black roots. She says:

I always did wonder why Africans were so black. *Why am I so black?* Mama Roxie is black. Night- sky black. She lives in South Carolina and everyone says I look like her. I love my grandmother, but I don't want to look like her. I want to look like my mom who's light skinned. (Willis 2013: 4)

Thus, the black color in Jasmine's mind, as perpetuated by the dominant culture, is linked to negative stereotypes such as ugliness, and dirtiness. It is given

a bad image which sticks profoundly in the mindset of Jasmine and becomes an internalized attitude. Therefore, African American girls seek to be beautiful and no one wants to be called black or dark because as Rondilla maintains “the word dark and beauty just did not go together. Dark canceled beauty out. Dark meant you were lower class, ugly and unimportant”. (2009: 63) As a result, in a society in which blackness is disdained, being too black is the worst luck one can ever have. That is to say, for Jasmine being too dark means too ugly and accordingly no boy would approach a black or an ugly girl. On the other hand, deeply in the psyche of the blacks, whiteness is associated with positive images such as superiority, beauty and freedom. Whiteness guarantees having a romantic relationship. According to Susan L. Bryant “Romantic relationships can be another major area of black women’s adult lives that are affected by European standards of beauty”. (2019: 84) In other words, being white or at least having white features will assure a partner for Jasmine. She notes:

I saw the group of boys who walked by me on the way home from school last month. ‘Damn, she black as my hoodie,’ one said as they approached. Why could boys be black and it didn’t matter? Why did we have to look a certain way? And the ones who did date dark-skinned girls didn’t want anybody to know. (Willis 2013: 94)

The idealized standards of beauty are also oppressive tools that restrict the life of the females with ethnic features. According to Bryant(2019: 80-81), the European beauty standard is “the notion that the more closely associated a person is with European features, the more attractive he or she is considered; these standards deem attributes that are most closely related to whiteness, such as lighter skin, straight hair, a thin nose and lips, and light colored eyes, as beautiful”. Women of color are overloaded by these standards. They are surrounded by a society in which what is white is better and beautiful and ethnic markers deserve mockery and shame. Americans with ethnic features are deemed ugly and different in light of these standards. However, such racialized perspectives affect young people’s identities and damage their self-confidence, and assessments of others. These ideals, Gilman (1999: 118) argues, “are not just concerned with beauty and attractiveness, but with markers of who is and is not acceptably human, who can and cannot be trusted... such beliefs and attitudes, continually propagated and strengthened by the relations of power”. Thus, under the idealized standards lies a very important idea which is the supremacy of the whites over other races. Reflecting on the idea of being different compared to the whites, Gilman (1999: 117) remarks “whether Black or Asian, a nose that is too flat, hair that is too kinky or eye that is slant all have been altered by cosmetic surgeries because of their otherness in relation to Western ideals”. Therefore, internalized Western beauty standards reflect the hierarchal relations and the racial division of society. Willis reveals how the internalization of the white ideals of beauty can negatively impact the life of the African American girls through the character of Jasmine.

From an early stage of her life, Jasmine learns the idea that black is not pretty, but ugly. She is surrounded by a set of white standards of beauty that specifies who is beautiful and who is not. These racialized standards become the norm that people

of color want to match. Jasmine is sure that if she were white-skinned, her life would have been different. As a teenager, she hopelessly longs to possess the conventional white features. She wants to change her dark skin through bleaching. Willis writes: "I used to pray for the day when I could get my skin bleached like Gavin". (2013:26) Jasmine wants very much to have light skin. She believes that her aunt is beautiful because she is "Not black, like me". (Willis, 2013: 26) Norwood and Foreman (2014: 18-19) argue that:

The closer one's skin tone is to white, the better one's chances of success; you may not be white but if you are light, you are good enough. For black Americans, this distinction has had very damaging effects, particularly on young black girls. Longing for light skin makes a dark chocolate-colored girl long to be the color of a cinnamon-colored girl. The cinnamon-colored girl longs to be a little lighter: coffee- but with a lot of cream.

Therefore, the ideology that being white is better than being black became imbedded into the black psyche as a result of the treatment of whiteness as a privilege and blackness as a dis-merit.

Jasmine equates beauty with European features. Therefore, she wants to conform to the white beauty. However, her obsession with the white standards of beauty affects her self-definition and her life as a whole. She laments the fact that her father married her mother and the result is that she is born black. She wishes that when growing up she can marry a white person. She says: "I wanna marry somebody Spanish or White so my kids' hair won't be kinky like mine". (Willis 2013: 95) Her longing for whiteness results in her feelings of inferiority both aesthetically and racially and affects her self-confidence and self-esteem. She aspires to look like the white woman on the box in the beauty salon. The image of that woman is always present in her mind. Willis proposes that the ideologies propagated by dominant groups and which are embraced by minority groups influence negatively the psychology of the dark females. Jasmine narrates:

A few days earlier, I'd snuck into my mom's closet and climbed up to her top shelf in search of that little box. I'd seen the picture on the box a million times- in beauty salons where my mom got her hair done, in *Teen Scene* magazine, in the music videos and in my head. The woman on the box starred in the movie in my head that I played over and over and over- on my way to school, on the way home from school and when I looked in mirror. When I brushed my teeth, she smiled at me with her cocoa butter skin, high cheek bones, arched eyebrows, her slender White girl nose and her hair -her hair, parted down the middle was long...silky...black...shiny. (Willis 2013:1-2)

This quotation shows how she is obsessed with the image of the white woman who always lingers in her mind. This woman is a symbol of western beauty and attractiveness. The presence of the image in beauty salons, in the magazines and in the movies, sends a message that this is the desirable image society prefers. Hence, by sending racist messages that are difficult to ignore, Popular culture, which

shapes our values and beliefs, can convey African Americans to grow up hating themselves. Bryant (2019:81) comments:

Black women today are subjected to incessant messages about European ideals of beauty through family, peers, partners, the media, and larger society. If young black women stand in contrast to what society dictates as attractive, they may find it difficult to grow to accept themselves. As a result, the internalization of racialized beauty standards can perpetuate into a lifelong, intergenerational culture of self-hatred.

Because Jasmine is always reminded of her blackness, she became convinced that she is ugly and unable to accept herself as a black girl. She compares herself to the woman on the box who meets all the Western standards of beauty. In contrast, she is black-skinned with big nose and nappy hair; namely she is the complete opposite of the white woman. Willis points out how the internalization of whiteness leads to racial self-loathing when Jasmine describes herself as follows:

When I raised my head and stared at my reflection, this time, *it* stared back. She wasn't smiling like she always did, and her skin wasn't cocoa butter or caramel or any shade that made boys light up and strain their necks to stare at you long after you'd passed them by because it wasn't her skin. She wasn't the lady on the relaxer kit and she wasn't the girl in the music video. She was me. *Black. Dirty. African.* (Willis 2013: 3)

The comparison Jasmine makes between her and the white lady is one way of constructing her eagerness for whiteness. She is not satisfied with her body. She develops feelings of self-hatred because she does not see herself beautiful. She notes "I was the ugly little freak that nobody wanted to dance with". (Willis 2013: 18) Neal and Wilson (1989: 328) remark that much of the black female's obsession about skin color and features has to do with the black woman's attempting to attain a "high desirability stem[ming] from her physical similarity to the white standard of beauty". Therefore, young adults' desire for light skin is important because the image of a typical American is one who is white and has Eurocentric features. (Rondilla 2009: 67) Willis exposes the psychological impact of the internalization of whiteness through the pain Jasmine bears because of being black-skinned. According to Awad, Norwood, McClain and Hilliard(2014: 2):

In the past and still today, Black women's bodies and beauty have largely been devalued and rejected by mainstream culture, which overvalues the European aesthetic and undervalues the esthetic of other racial/ethnic group with of exception of exoticizing them. The U.S. puts a premium on "fair" white skin, blue eyes, and straight, long, blond hair and considers these features the epitome of beauty. Features more akin to the African aesthetic are deemed ugly, undesirable, and less feminine. The notion that Black women are less attractive is a message that is transmitted daily and from multiple external forces or social institutions.

The messages surrounding skin color and beauty encourage young black girls to internalize white beauty standards. Thus, the one thing that did not change about America is the value of the white skin which represents power and privilege.

Another important feature of the white beauty standards is the straight hair. Hair is an important issue which Willis brings into light. The novel opens with Jasmine, who is not happy with her hair, trying to straighten it with the hot comb. She is sure that her hair is vital to her self-esteem. She believes that her hair is the source to her ugliness. She feels that straight hair could make her beautiful and admirable. Throughout the novel, Jasmine is obsessed by having straight hair. She does not like the way her hair is, and she does not want to wear her hair natural because natural meant ugly. Natural hair, however, is an important feature of the African American identity. In her poetry, Jasmine writes:

*You tell me to be proud
You're beautiful some say
Then why do all the boys
Look the other way
I wish my hair were long
And straight and soft and good
My mom doesn't understand,
But I really wish she would.*(Willis 2013: 92)

It is clear that white standards of beauty affect negatively black people in such a way that the black people had developed self-hatred. Jasmine's internalization of white beauty standards affects her life immensely. She comes to deviate herself from her identity as black American and at times she hates being born black. Jasmine's internalized set of white values victimizes, oppresses, and sets her away from her community and this is clear in her feeling of being alone in the world. She believes that no one understands her suffering - even her mother. Her self-hatred becomes clear to everyone. Her mother comments on her self-loathing saying "I don't know where you're getting all this self-hatred from all of a sudden, but you need to stop looking at all your friends and all these girls on TV". (Willis 2013: 96)

In a word, many African American girls bear so much pain for being surrounded by European beauty standards which influence their self-definition and confidence and lead to self-hatred, loneliness and body-dissatisfaction. Females who internalize European ideals are convinced that they are less beautiful and less attractive compared to females with white features. Hence, they suffer immensely. The influence of Western ideals of beauty on the teens of ethnic groups gives clear evidence on how society influences their values and beliefs.

However, Willis is convinced that it is through critical consciousness that African Americans can get rid of this dilemma of internalized racial oppression. Jasmine starts to dismantle the racial and aesthetical internalization when she began to gain awareness about who she is and through the power of knowledge and education. Willis' novel is an example of African American literature that is developed as a liberating tool tackling the racialized worldview.

One of the disciplines which aims at shifting out the perceptions and behaviors that perpetuate oppression is the field of social justice education. One of

the aims of this field is to free people's minds of any ideas or behaviors that may help in the emergence of issues that hold people back. The goal of social justice education is "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs". (Bell 1997: 3) In addition, social justice education aims at enabling people to "develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive system, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in institutions and communities of which they are a part". (Bell 1997: 4)

A prominent figure in the field of social justice education is the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his classical work on education among the oppressed, Freire provides a rich description of the conditions of the oppressed. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* illustrates the stages of oppression and the process of liberation. The first stage is the 'identification with the oppressor' or the 'adhesion' to the oppressor. (Freire 1970:45) He (1970:44) argues that initially, the oppressed "feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life" to the extent that it "becomes an overpowering aspiration," and "in their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them". This is because their model to "full humanity" is represented by their oppressors. They adhere to the oppressor's values and find in the oppressor their model of manhood. (Freire 1970: 45) They internalize the image of their oppressors and adopt their guidelines to the extent that they become "oppressors or sub-oppressors" (Freire 1970: 45). As a result of "their identification with the oppressor, they have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class". (Freire 1970: 46) The oppressed, "having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility". (Freire 1970:47)

Freire (1970:51) calls the "the process of liberation" "critical consciousness". He believes that oppression can be countered with critical consciousness which comes as a result of individuals learn to critically realize the sources of their oppressive condition. Critical consciousness comes from learning to acknowledge their oppression and be aware of their situation because "as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation". (Freire 1970: 46) He (1970:47) maintains that in order to overcome the situation of oppression, "people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity". Thus, the oppressed has to confront his/her reality, recognize their oppression and take action against it. To achieve liberation, the oppressed must not only develop an awareness of their oppression, but they must also transform their situation.

This key concept of the critical consciousness in the process of liberation is emphasized by Barbara Love who argues that in order to bring about social change, social justice and greater equality in systems and institutions characterized by oppression, a critical step, must be taken. Love (2000: 470-1) asserts:

A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression characterizing society without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition, to maintain an awareness of the role played by each individual in the maintenance of the system without blaming them for the roles they play, and at the same time practice intentionality about changing the systems of oppression. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live 'outside' the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems.

Hence, liberatory consciousness is a mechanism that can raise people's awareness about the reality they live. It is a critical tool in arousing people's consciousness toward changing their life. It is a way to help people survive in an oppressive context to live with peace at least internally if not externally.

Like A Tree Without Roots demonstrates the importance of critical consciousness in releasing internalized racial oppression. Jasmine undergoes a process of healing when she started to gain a kind of awareness of who she is. One step in this process of healing is to gain knowledge and to be enlightened about her black heritage. When alienated from positive black traditions, Jasmine suffered. Through Ms. Ervin, the teacher of the Social Studies class in the novel, Jasmine is able to gain knowledge about her black culture. Because Willis is an educator, she realizes the value of education. Therefore, the role of education is vital in transforming the consciousness of the oppressed and in achieving freedom. Through Ms. Ervin, Willis reveals the importance of education in enlightening people's minds about history and heritage. She teaches her students about the African Americans who were enslaved and the negative stereotypes about them. She lets her students know the reality of the blacks and teaches them to look at slavery from a different perspective. She enriches her students with pride in their identity. The effect of Ms. Ervin is great on Jasmine who feels grateful to her: "Thank you for making us think about things differently, I learned so much all year, especially during these past few days". (Willis 2013:140) After that, Jasmine starts to look positively to herself.

Another important step in Jasmine's gaining consciousness is through her grandmother Mama Roxie. Through Roxie, Jasmine is exposed to her ethnic and racial history. This critical exposure leads to the emergence of an empowering critical consciousness. Roxie teaches Jasmine about the black heritage and its roots which make her stand and face the reality of who she is. She shows her how beautiful her dark skin and curly hair are. She tries to convince her that she looks like the universe because she has the color of the sun. She helps Jasmine a lot in removing away the hatred inside her. She tells her: "Jasmine, you can't cut out hatred. Just like the doctors who try to cut cancer out of someone's body- it can't be done. You have to heal at the root!". (Willis 2013: 174) She convinces her by saying that:

a tree cut off from its roots is a dead tree. And whatever bad there may be, there's always a lot more good. Bad don't cancel out good! And we've got to celebrate the good. We've got to heal from this sickness that's been passed on us, thinking White folk are better because they think it themselves! Trying to be like them! We can't be ashamed of our dark skin, Jasmine. We've to love who we are. We've to love how we look' cause God didn't make no mistakes. (Willis 2013:177)

By introducing the history of African ancestors, Roxie has helped Jasmine to heal internally. Roxie reveals to Jasmine the truth about her black ancestors who were exploited and used by the Whites:

Baby, your roots don't begin in slavery. They begin in Africa, where our people come from. And when they came over here, they didn't forget their roots. They didn't try to cure no sickness with no knife. They used herbs and they used the fire in their spirits. They used the love God gave 'em so whoever was sick could heal from the inside. You can't heal from the outside without healing from the inside. (Willis 2013: 176)

Roxie believes that the person who does not know his heritage is like a tree without roots. He/she becomes confused, angry and lost. She helps Jasmine to be proud of herself and her race. She showed her pictures of great people who made the African history. Willis (2013: 192) conceptualizes critical consciousness in the words Roxie utters "By learning the truth and talking about it. Like what Ms. Ervin did with you last week. And remembering the good in us. Celebrating the good".

When Roxie introduces Jasmine to Sister Muhsinah who runs an African American History camp, they were able to stay together and talk about the black heritage. Sister Muhsinah helps make Jasmine see the beauty of blackness through introducing her to black figures in the exhibit they visit together. She tells Jasmine "And as you continue to grow and blossom, be proud of where you come from! Be proud of your ancestors! And know that the pain of the past and hope of the future are rooted in the same soil". (Willis 2013:224) Also, in Roxie's birthday party, Jasmine is given the chance to have a clearer vision of her black culture. The party was meant to honor the soul of blacks who made the African history.

Jasmine is able to gain a clear vision of her blackness when she is surrounded by a black community who have pride in their identity. She is completely changed after her visit to her grandmother. For the first time of her life, Jasmine begins to cherish her dark skin. She expressed her pride in her ethnicity in the poetry she writes after she became firmly rooted. She describes her dark skin in her poem "My Black Self" as follows:

*Dark...like the night sky under a South Carolina moon
Black like my father and my grandmother too
Dark...and black...and cute and smart
Black...and dark...and hated and despised
I'm angry and I'm tired
I'm happy and I'm sad*

It's time to start loving

My Black Self.(Willis 2013:234-5)

The healing process through which Jasmine undergoes is clear in her poetry. It is in her writing that she came to voice her pride in her ethnic identity. After gaining consciousness, Jasmine writes “*Jasmine has a right to the tree of life ...*”. (Willis 2013: 229) The novel ends with Jasmine healed completely from self-hatred, and became proud of her roots:

And as I looked at my dad, then at my mom, I saw tears welling up in her eyes, and I made sure she saw them welling up in mine. And in that moment, I knew. I knew that all this time, I'd been wrong too. Just like those little girls who pushed away the black doll, I'd been wrong too. And even though I didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow or the next day, I knew what was happening now. I was beginning to believe the truth. I'm not cursed by the sun. I'm blessed by the sun. Rooted in love. And ready to bloom. (Willis 2013:256)

To conclude, by exposing a fundamental teen issue and providing ways to counter it, the role of young adult literature in transcending racism is highlighted. It is through young adult literature that we can illuminate the minds of people of color and enhance their sense of ethnic identity. Young adult literature proves to be a valuable tool in helping black young adults to have awareness and knowledge to succeed in the American society. It is considered a commodity that provides black young adults with a means of transcending oppression and segregation. It can lead to their self-discovery and can help them in eliminating whatever sense of isolation or alienation they may have. It can also help them overcome difficult personal problems. In fact, the study of internalized racial oppression as a socio-psychological issue deepens our understanding on how internalized oppression is maintained and perpetuated. It also gives comprehensive insights on the effects of oppression on the psychological construction of the identity of the oppressed. In *Like A Tree Without Roots* (2013), Willis succeeds in presenting the social and the psychological aspects of internalized racial oppression in relation to African American female teens. In addition, the novel displays the negative impact of the internalization of Western beauty standards on the psychology of African American teenagers. Willis excels in revealing that healing and liberation from oppression requires a kind of critical consciousness. Her novel emphasizes the fundamental role of literature that is targeted to young adults in exposing teen issues and introducing solutions.

Abeer Fathi Ibrahim, Assistant Lecturer – Corresponding Author
Department of English Language and Literature
Helwan University, Egypt
ORCID Number:0009-0002-1621-0689
Email: abeer_fathy@arts.helwan.edu.eg/ Abeerfathi36@gmail.com

Maha Mohamed Hosny, Professor of English Literature
Department of English Language and Literature
Helwan University, Egypt
ORCID Number: 0009-0007-1607-4871
Email: maha_ali@arts.helwan.edu.eg/ Mahahosny2002@yahoo.com

Iman El Sayed Raslan, Associate Professor
Associate Professor of English Literature
Department of English Language and Literature
Helwan University, Egypt
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-9414-5723
Email: eman_raslan@arts.helwan.edu.eg / im_raslan@yahoo.com

References

- Awad, Germaine H. et al.** (2014). Beauty and body image concerns among African American college.
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280770434 Beauty and Body](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280770434_Beauty_and_Body)
 (Retrieved on 12 March, 2020)
- Baxley, Traci P. and Genyne Henry Boston.** (2014). *(In) Visible Presence: Feminist Counter Narratives of Young Adult Literature by Women of Color*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Bell, Lee Anne.** (1997). 'Theoretical foundations of social justice education'. In Maurianne Adams and Lee Anne Bell (eds.), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Source Book*, 3-15. New York: Routledge.
- Bryant, Susan L.** (2019). 'The beauty ideal: The effects of European standards of beauty on black women'. *Columbia Social Work Review*, 11(1): 80-91.
- Collins, Carol Jones.** (1993) 'A tool for change: Young adult literature in the lives of young adult African-Americans'. *Library Trends*, 41(3): 378-92.
- Freire, Paulo.** (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gilman, Sander L.** (1999). *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Girandi, Tamara and Abigail G. Scheg.** (2018). 'Introduction'. In Tamara Girandi and Abigail G. Scheg (eds), *Young Adult Literature in the Composition Classrooms: Essays on Practical Application*, 101-120. North California: Library of Congress Cataloguing.
- Latham, Dom and Melissa Gross.** (2014). *Young Adult Resources Today: Connecting Teens with Books, Music, Games, Movies and More*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Lipsky, Suzanne.** (1987). *Internalized Racism*. Seattle: Rational Island Publishers.
- Love, Barbara.** (2000). 'Developing a liberatory consciousness'. In Warren J. Blumenfeld et al. (eds), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Anti-semitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism and Classism*, 470-474. New York: Routledge.
- Neal, Angela M. and Midge L. Wilson.** (1989). 'The role of skin color and features in the black community: Implications for black women and therapy'. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 9: 323-33.
- Norwood, Kimberly Jade and Violeta Solenova Foreman.** (2014). 'The ubiquitousness of colorism: Then and now'. In Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.), *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Postracial America*, 9-28. New York: Routledge.
- Panlay, Suriyan.** (2016). *Racism in Contemporary African American Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pyke, D. Karen.** (2007). 'Defying the taboo on the study of internalized racial oppression'. In Emory Elliott, Jasmine Payne and Patricia Ploesch, (eds), *Global Migration, Social Change and Cultural Transformation*, 101-120. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Pyke, D. Karen.** (2010). 'What is internalized racial oppression and why don't we study it? Acknowledging racism hidden injuries'. *Pacific Sociological Association*, 53(4): 551–572.
- Rondilla, Joanne L.** (2009). 'Filipinos and the color complex: Ideal Asian beauty'. In Evelyn Kakano Glenn (ed.), *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rountree, Wendy.** (2008) 'Loathing the Black body: Rosa Guy's *The music of summer*'. In Wendy Rountree (ed), *Just Us Girls: Contemporary African American Young Adult Novel*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Willis, Teresa Ann.**(2013). *Like A Tree Without Roots*. New York: Ase Publishing.
- Williams, Teeomm K.** (2012) Understanding internalized oppression: A theoretical conceptualization of internalized subordination. Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.