

## **An Analysis on the blend of Collective Consciousness and Cognitive Dissonance in the play - The Unmentionables**

*Ms. Maheshwari Suresh*

*Lecturer, English Studies Department,*

*Bayan College,*

*Sultanate of Oman,*

*email: [maheshwari@bayancollege.edu.om](mailto:maheshwari@bayancollege.edu.om)*

### **Abstract**

Literature as a reflection of societal dynamics captures the essence of human experience and serves as powerful medium for conveying cultural knowledge. This research article delves into the intricate relationship between collective consciousness and cognitive dissonance through qualitative analysis. In applying the concept of collective consciousness and the theory of cognitive dissonance to the characters in Bruce Norris' "The Unmentionables", the research expounds on the complicated interplay of societal influences, the individuals' behaviour and their manifestation of hypocrisy. The study aims to contribute the broader understanding of how literature serves as a mirror reflecting the complexities of human existence and societal structures. The chosen text for study challenges the readers and the audience to antagonize the uncomfortable and unmentionable truths about hypocrisy, supremacy, and exploitation, particularly within the context of the supreme white and powerful black exploiting the vulnerable black community. The analysis extends the genre of satire which exposes the societal follies and hypocrisies through subtle ridicule and laughter.

**Key words:** collective consciousness, cognitive dissonance, hypocrisy, supremacy

### **1.1 Introduction**

Literature, being the reflection and mirror of society and life is expressed in the form of words which holds truth, beauty and harsh reality. The words expressed are thoughts, emotions and inspirations deep from the heart and soul of human spirit. Literature has always been the source of inspiration, pleasure and pain which not only occupies the human mind and leaves a memory but also opens a pathway to future aspects. It preserves the best and worst part of human life since the beginning of human civilization.

Literature is voiced in different genres like poems, short stories, novels, dramas and plays. It is a form of art which is presented both in written and oral forms with creative, expressive, everlasting universal qualities. Among different genres, play is one of the oral forms of literature which holds a unique position in communication. A play is written for a theatrical performance to be played on the stage. Being a powerful medium for conveying and transmitting cultural knowledge and values, it remains performative and ensures that the audience are emotionally involved in the process of storytelling.

A distinguished quality of play is the capability to instigate a wide range of emotions. The emotional connection of the audience with the play helps to deeply get associated with the dramatic performances of the characters in the play. A dramatic performance effectively fosters a deeper understanding of a narrative. The audience unconsciously connect themselves with the themes at a personal level. Satire is a form of literary art that weakens the concept by making it ridiculous and evoking the attitude of laughter, sometimes contempt too. A comedy induces laughter as an end in itself on the other hand a satire attacks the human follies through irony which evokes laughter. The play chosen for study highlights the satirical elements. The laughter becomes a tomahawk against a butt which can make the work extremely uncomfortable and compelling to the audience. The butt might be on an individual, a race, a class, a community or the whole society. The play “The Unmentionables” written by Bruce Norris is taken for analysis to study the present research. Bruce Norris is a contemporary American playwright born in 1960, a recipient of Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for “Clybourne Park” which is his magnum opus and a consummate exploration of racial tensions across a time period of fifty years. The playwright navigates the crossroads of comedy and the American society. His artistic home is at the Chicago-based Steppenwolf Theatre Company, where he crafted his skills of acting and a playwright. His other works are “The Pain and the Itch”, “Purple Heart” and “Domesticated”. This research paper examines and analyses the spiritual hypocrisy and class disparity both with the supreme white and the powerful black in Norris’ “The Unmentionables”.

## 2.1 Review of Literature

According to Prakash (2014), literature should not be tranquilizing, but it's something that should create pain and irritation, it should react as a catalyst provoking the readers or spectators to change the world and themselves. Babbit (1922) describes the fundamental element of a responsible man is strictly to look earnest and moral, serve as an example to the community, but sometimes can be corrupt and hypocrite underneath. Hypocrites are normally considered as corrupt in their moral values, sarcastic and distrustful individuals and who consciously and intentionally deceive others in order to fulfill and supplement their own interests (Statman, 1997). Hypocrisy is determined by a feeling and the idea that one cannot be oneself. The individual pretends or acts for the sake of high esteem received from the society. The feeling of falsification prevails in the circumstances of moral and ethical belief (Hallman & Spiro, 2023).

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist termed the word collective consciousness in 1893. According to Durkheim collective consciousness is "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society" (Durkheim, 1893). In simple terms, it's the sense which is common to many individuals. Collective consciousness is a set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society (Jary & Jary, 2005). According to Petric (2020), individuals who commonly belong to same nationality become the collective consciousness of a nation. It is more commonly created through any culture, religion, legislative and education but controlled by a totalitarian propaganda. The influential people use brain wash techniques to manipulate the commons to share collective consciousness, if not they will be rejected by the people who share a totalitarian consciousness.

Leon Festinger was the first to propose the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957 in order to describe the connection between motivation, perception and cognition of an individual. Cognitive dissonance theory implies that when the thoughts feelings and actions are inconsistent, it leads to a state of cognitive dissonance which can be uncomfortable. The individual when encounters this dissonance they engage in the behaviour of blaming others, self-justifying and manifesting hypocrisy (Tueanrat & Alamanos, 2023). Hypocrisy ascends when an individual's behaviour deviates from the prospects associated with their role in the society. Violating social norms, being inconsistent with their moral values and failing to live up their own expectations intends hypocrisy.

### **3.1 Methodology**

The research methodology implemented in this paper is qualitative method which is descriptive, theoretical and analytical. Although the chosen play for study is meant for theatrical performance, the sample used for analysis is the printed book form of the play. The primary source in the form of text of Bruce Norris' *The Unmentionables* was collected at the preliminary stage followed by a collection of secondary sources which included the review of the literature as analysed by other authors, newspaper articles and theatre reviews. Many articles dealing with the concept of collective consciousness and the theory of cognitive dissonance were retrieved from various sites and analysed for the fulfilment of the paper. The concept of collective consciousness and the theory of cognitive dissonance is applied to explore the blend of collective hypocritical consciousness in the characters of the play "The Unmentionables".

### **4.1 Results**

Bruce Norris' *The Unmentionables* had its world premier at Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago on June 29, 2006. The play was printed and published in 2009. Bruce Norris' "The Unmentionables" is a sharp and prickly satire which reveals the hypocrisies of the American middle class people. Like *The Pain and the Itch*, the playwright unfolds the murky notions and ideologies of the middle class Americans. The challenging playwright daringly challenges the audience by a warning through the voice of the teenage African boy Etienne. The title of the play is mysterious and entices the audience to know the unmentioned truth through the characters of the play. The play does not have any specific heroes or heroines and the audience try to fix the protagonist of the play. Initially, the protagonist Dave looks like a hero with non-heroic qualities but finally, happens to be a victim of his own foibles. And he is neither an anti-hero nor a villain. The play is based on the themes of hypocrisy, racism, supremacy and slavery. The present analysis exposes the attitude of the white and the powerful black's exploitation towards the downtrodden black community especially children and labourers which remains stuck in a communication impasse. Liberalism has reached surfaced advancements, however the play reveals the patronizing insensitivity still vibrant in the minds of the people.

## Act I Scene I

*DAVE* : “All life is a series of choices....And the way you approach those choices...is like a little fork in the road” (09).

### Interpretation

Dave is a White American in his twenties. His first appearance reveals that he preaches Christianity. The pungent essence of spiritualism emits as he speaks about the decisions that one makes in his or her life. Those choices alone can bring either life and happiness or death and destruction which are compared to a fork in the road. Dave justifies himself for his choices and decisions taken and calls Jesus Christ a “pretty cool guy” (11). Dave compares himself with Jesus Christ, like the Christ he has sacrificed himself to do good to others.

Dave suspects Etienne for setting fire to the local school run by the American Christian Missionary where Dave and Jane work. Jane is Dave’s fiancé and a former Television artiste, who has come to Africa to make a possible change to the poor children by imparting education. Dave questions Etienne for spreading a rumour which has completely damaged his reputation in the locals. But the boy is determined and he harshly reprimands Dave.

Etienne abuses Dave for his hypocrisy and reveals to the Doctor in the African language that he is a fag, which is at the outset not understood by Dave and Jane.

*ETIENNE [to the Doctor]: Mogo kolondo, be y’o don. [Tr; This guy’s a fag, everybody knows it.] (13).*

The boy reveals the horrible truth about Dave and remains in the minds of the audience when Dave admits the murky truth in the end of the play.

Don is an American and a rich industrialist who has come to Africa in order to stimulate the economic growth of the locals. But ironically the fact is Don has exploited the locals and he too is hypocritical. Jane is treated by the African Doctor for she suffers fibromyalgia — a kind of stiffness in the muscle or sometimes pain caused by depression and anxiety. Jane exaggerates and overreacts for her pain. She enjoys the hospitality provided by the rich couple Don and Nancy. Dave feels uncomfortable to accept Don’s hospitality as he strongly believes that Don has exploited the locals with the help of a corrupt African lady, Auntie Mimi. Don and Auntie Mimi though both belong to different race, their consciousness serves hypocrisy by strongly exploiting the locals.

Bruce Norris glimpses on the punctuality of the African officials who do not follow a punctual time and they work only for their self-economic growth and not for the progress of their country. Don and Dave wait for Auntie Mimi's arrival. Auntie Mimi is an African woman from the locals working for the government and she is a corrupt official. Don always throws interest on the economic growth of himself and not for the locals. Though Don has provided shelter for Dave and Jane, he reminds that he would start charging rent after two weeks of their stay. Dave considers the missionary school, a living quarters and calls "an indigenous family" but Jane refers it a "shed", since she couldn't tolerate the heat (17). Jane has come to Africa to do good, teach and educate the African children but she could not sacrifice the cosy life style and falls as a victim of hypocrisy.

Bruce Norris intelligently has packed his characters with sharp and prickly dialogues and portrays the foul attitude of the American middle class people. The doctor, who smartly represents the voice of the audience, throws an acidic remark on the four hypocritical whites of the play. The witty dominance of the African characters in the play challenges the American audience and puts everyone to horrible silence where no one could defend these four Americans that are ultimately flat till the end of the play. Dave though admits he is a gay, does not repent and atone for his immoral quality. Jane has come to bring a change in the lives of those poor children does not even sacrifice her cozy life and plans to remain in the villa enjoying the luxury.

### Act 1 Scene 2

*"I see them stuffing the food in their greedy fat little faces and talking so loudly and waving their hands and telling their little stories, and all I start to think is,....If only I had a tomahawk with which I could hit these people in their heads, perhaps then I could enjoy the party. Do you find this to be true for you?" (41).*

### Interpretation:

Bruce Norris scholarly ridicules the American hypocrisy through the mouth-piece of the African Doctor. Bruce Norris plants a tomahawk (a weapon used by the Native American Indians to defend themselves against the white people) on the American audience. Scene two opens with the doctor entering into the room. He looks at Dave coming out of the bathroom holding a book (Bible). The doctor flays the Americans for their greedy and selfish attitude as Don's birthday party preparations are done by Nancy.



The consciousness of all the characters except the African Doctor, collectively dissonant their cognition and entirely reveal their hypocrisy. Though each character states a cause and purpose to work for the welfare and well being of the African children, their attitude still remains only to exploit for their own benefits. The African lady too exploits her own people and sends the locals as labourers to work for Don. The concept of collective consciousness weaves its way through the narrative and shaping interactions of the characters. The most striking aspect is that the characters despite their diverse backgrounds and circumstances are interconnected and share a mutual cognitive dissonance. Each character in the play represents the individual or a group reflecting the common stigma of the society. This shared marginalization of hypocrisy creates a collective consciousness that transcends their distinctiveness.

Bruce Norris implicitly addresses hypocrisy in “The Unmentionables”, he ingeniously uses the characters to expose the hypocrisy that exists within the individuals and the society as a whole.

### **5.1 Conclusion**

This research paper has glimpsed the multifaceted relationship between collective consciousness with a blend of cognitive dissonance and revealing hypocrisy through a thorough analysis of the play “The Unmentionables”. The present study underscores the examination of collective consciousness as conceptualized by Emile Durkheim. The amalgamation of Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance provides deeper insights into the inconsistencies in individual’s thoughts, feelings and actions, leading to behaviours of blaming others and manifesting hypocrisy. “The Unmentionables” unravels the hypocrisies embedded in the American middle class society shedding light on the issues of racism, supremacy of both powerful black and white and their exploitation to the poor class Africans. This research encourages further exploration on the intricacies to define the human experience and societal transformations.

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