Racial And National Stereotypes In Literature

In The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois depicted the presence of a Veil that separated the different races and presented the notion of “double consciousness.” He argued that African Americans have a dual identity rooted in their awareness of how white Americans see them and recognition of their own individual qualities and culture. They are forced to consider themselves from the eyes of white American society and internalize this negative gaze. Due to the conflicting perceptions of the races, African Americans have two distinct souls that impede them from ever connecting with their true identity and recognizing themselves. In A Passage to India, Forster further conveys the notion of “double consciousness” because he portrays Indians who feel desperate to present themselves as obedient and honorable natives to and believe their culture is inferior to that of their rulers. However, he complicates this idea as both and Indians struggle to understand their identity and position in society. Rather than internalizing the perceptions of others, Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding attempt to behave in manners that are expected of them while maintaining strong opinions about the other culture. Whereas Du Bois painted a clearer image of the Veil separating the African Americans and white Americans, Forster introduced Aziz and Fielding, who attempted to look past superficial qualities and to bridge the cultures within India.

In Du Bois’ seminal work, he emphasizes that the Veil dividing white and African American society prevents the latter from recognizing the value of their culture and individual worth. His idea of double consciousness delineates the impact of stereotypes perpetuated by white people on African American views of themselves. In Chapter I, he states “ It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls…,” demonstrating that the stereotypes of white American society prevent African Americans from escaping oppressive labels and viewing themselves as human (Du Bois, 38). Whereas the text claims that African Americans must take pride in their identity and ignore labels, double-consciousness enhances their desire to simply conform and follow the laws of segregation and inequality. Furthermore, the racism of American society creates a sense of double consciousness that causes it to be difficult for African Americans to adopt both their cultural and American values. Even though they feel pressured to relinquish their cultural roots and ideals, the color of their skin prevents them from ever truly connecting with the other side of the Veil. Du Bois believes they strive to foster and develop “the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack (Du Bois, 43).” By connecting their culture to that of white America, African Americans would eventually contribute to a beneficial change and recognize their identity.

Similarly, in A Passage to India a Veil separates from the Indians and causes the latter to assume inferior positions within society, so their rulers would view them as well-behaved and cultured natives. For instance, despite Aziz’s many efforts to help characters in their search of the true India, many refused to see him as anything except the typical stereotype. For instance, even though Aziz performed a kind action for Mr. Fielding by giving away his back-collar stud, Ronny belittled him to Adela and judged him using the typical Indian stereotype, yet Aziz should

have been respected due to his medical prowess and polite manner. Ronny said, “Aziz was exquisitely dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back-collar stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race (Forster, 87).” His comment reveals how Aziz is reduced to a simple generalization by a prominent authority figure, who understands his importance to the community as a dexterous doctor but refuses to see him as an individual. Similarly, when Aziz was accused of assaulting Adela, Ronny and other English people immediately concluded that he must have committed the crime due to the uncivilized nature and villainous tendencies of Indians. During the trial, Mr. McBryde states, “All unfortunate natives are criminals at heart, for the simple reason that they live south of latitude 30. They are not to blame, they have not a dog’s chance- we should be like them if we settled here,” demonstrating that he believes their criminal behavior is innate and results from their environment (Forster, 184). The Veil dividing the races grew more apparent within this moment because the English emphasize the inherent inferiority of the Indians and their inability to attain a civilized nature. The judge them through a stereotypical perspective and fail to see the Indians’ distinct characteristics.

However, Forster complicates the idea of double consciousness as Aziz and Mr. Fielding are aware of their situations and recognize that the English are superior for superficial reasons that should not measure Indians’ individual worth. For instance, as soon as Aziz communicates with Ms. Moore, he instantly reveals his true opinion of his position within society. He states, “I am just a subordinate, my time is of no value, the verandah is good enough for an Indian, yes, yes, let him stand, and Mrs. Callender takes my carriage and cuts me dead… ” (Forster, 21). Aziz feels resentful of the Callenders for taking advantage of his desire to aid others and sarcastically illustrates that the treatment he receives is unfair. Moreover, he enjoys watching struggle to label them and define their identity but understands the risk that interactions between the races pose. According to the book, “When his spirits were up he felt that the English are a comic institution, and he enjoyed being misunderstood by them. But it was an amusement of the emotions and nerves, which an accident or the passage of time might destroy” (Forster, 56). Aziz only acts as if he respects the English and believes in their superiority, which differs from the notion of “double consciousness” in The Souls of Black Folk because Du Bois depicts that African Americans have already internalized the perspectives of white society. For example, in the Black Belt, they felt dejected as Jim Crow laws legalized segregation and the cash-crop economy caused them to remain trapped in a system of slavery. They had internalized the stereotypes perpetuated by wealthy, white plantation owners and contributed to the economic inequality widespread in the South. However, at the end of A Passage to India, Aziz completely relinquishes ties to the English and proclaims that “Down with the English. We may hate one another, but we hate you most,” depicting that he refuses to internalize their beliefs and will not pretend to be obedient any longer (Forster, 361). He understands that until finally leave India, he cannot maintain a friendship with Fielding because of their differences. Forster demonstrates that the Veil destroys meaningful relationships and prevents either side from crossing over. Aziz refused to conform to the beliefs of English society and chose to remain distant from their ideals.

Additionally, Forster continues to complicate this idea as he presents characters who attempt to cross the line of segregation and bridge the growing divide between the groups. Although Du Bois presents a few white characters, such as the New England school teachers, who attempt to help African Americans, his ultimate focus is the idea of African Americans bringing themselves up through higher education. He believes “The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes

must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth (Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” 1).” His idea of “The Talented Tenth” reflects the necessity for knowledge in order for exceptional African Americans to eventually attain equality. On the other hand, in A Passage to India, Mr. Fielding is a prime example of someone who disregards the typical beliefs of English society and forms his own conclusions about Indians, specifically Dr. Aziz. He attempts to help Indians bridge the divide between them and through conversation and friendship. At the Bridge Party, “When the moment for refreshments came, he [Mr. Fielding] did not move back to the English side, but burnt his mouth with gram. He talked to anyone and he ate anything” (Forster, 46). Mr. Fielding crossed the line between the English and Indians and ignored the idea that the groups must be segregated at social events. Moreover, he excitedly invites Aziz to a dinner party and welcomes his friendship, yet their connection proves to be challenged by the emphasis on superiority. By the end of the book, Fielding still desires to reconnect with him during his return to India and maintains the hope that they can still be friends. He questions Aziz and asks, “Why can’t we be friends now? It’s what I want. It's what you want (Forster, 362).” Fielding, a white Englishman, desperately wants to connect with Aziz, who is blinded by the pain inflicted upon him during the trial, but the book concludes with them going in opposite directions due to their cultural differences. Similar to Du Bois, Forster illustrates how friendship between the two races is almost impossible because of the inequality and cultural division. However, Forster delineates the power of intercultural friendships in spite of cultural differences, but Du Bois emphasizes the power of African Americans when they educate themselves and assume leadership positions.

Therefore, A Passage to India both emphasizes and complicates the theme of double consciousness present within The Souls of Black Folk. Du Bois and Forster intend to illustrate that an individual cannot be defined by stereotypes, which prevents them from ever seeing themselves or others through their own perception. However, Du Bois claims that African Americans have internalized the negative gaze of white American society, whereas Forster introduces Aziz and Mr. Fielding, who possess an unfiltered awareness of their own identity. In the beginning, Aziz desired to be viewed as civilized and intelligent by, but he rejected their culture and superiority by the end. Aziz had not internalized their stereotypes and recognized his own qualities and values. Through his book, Forster paints an image of both white and Indian characters striving to become united by crossing through the Veil, but Du Bois stresses the need for African Americans to finally receive education and rise above stereotypes in order to achieve equality.