

RACIAL IDENTITY IN JACQUELINE WOODSON'S *IF YOU COME SOFTLY***Mrs. Vinodini S. K.,**

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ABSTRACT

The scientific consensus is that race, in this sense, has no biological basis – we are all one race, the human race. Racial identity, however, is very real. *If You Come Softly* is about Jeremiah who is fifteen and black and Ellie who is fifteen and white. They meet at a private school and fall in love and then have to deal with how society treats them because of their races. Jeremiah is a black boy from Brooklyn while Ellie is a white girl from the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Their racial identity plays a vital role in their love. The enemies of Jeremiah and Ellie are racism, police brutality and people's general stupidity. The present paper tries to analyse the racial identity in Jacqueline Woodson's *If You Come Softly*.

Keywords: Racism, identity, love, brutality, black, white, teenagers, whisper, giggle, suspicious and interracial relationship.

Jacqueline Woodson (born February 12, 1963) is an American writer. She was born in Columbus, Ohio and grew up in Greenville, South Carolina and Brooklyn, New York. She is the author of over thirty books for children and adults, including *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995), recipient of both the Coretta Scott King Honour and the Jane Addams Children's Book Award; *Miracle's Boys* (2000). Woodson served as the Poetry Foundation's Young People's Poet Laureate from 2015 to 2017. She currently lives in Brooklyn with her family.

Woodson's work includes many of the issues that are present in the real world such as racial division, child abuse or interracial relationships. Like many other Black American authors, she shares the experience of being a member of a society in which race matters a great deal. In this sense, her writing for children is clearly rooted in an African American and

American social and literary history that can be traced all the way back to the 19th Century. African American children's literature developed as a literature of social action. It emerges from the very oral culture created by enslaved Africans to form and pass on a set of moral and spiritual values, to instruct each other, to build community and to entertain themselves. As Bishop puts it,

African American children's literature has roots in African American's determination to maintain a sense of themselves as fully human in the face of their legal status as property and to maintain some control over their own lives. Where literacy was forbidden and denied to African Americans, story and song flourished and served to entertain, to discipline, to provide information, to subvert slaveholders' intentions, and to transmit to children the values and attitudes that the community deemed necessary for its survival. (4)

In *If You Come Softly*, fifteen-year-old Elisha Eisen, known as Ellie, meets fifteen-year-old Jeremiah Roselind, known as Miah, on their first day of sophomore year at Percy Academy. When the two run into one another in the hall, Jeremiah knocks Ellie's books out of her hands. While helping her collect her things, the two share an unexpected connection. "I think only once in your life do you find someone that you say, "Hey, this is the person I want to spend the rest of my time on this earth with." And if you miss it, or walk away from it, or even maybe, blink - it's gone" (22). They are each surprised by how deeply they feel for each other right away, because Jeremiah is a black boy from Brooklyn while Ellie is a white girl from the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Jeremiah was black. He could feel it. The way the sun pressed down hard and hot on his skin in the summer. Sometimes it felt like he sweated black beads of oil. He felt warm inside his skin, protected. And in Fort Greene, Brooklyn—where everyone seemed to be some shade of black—he felt good walking through the neighbourhood. (32)

Though their attraction is unexpected, the teenagers each see something kind, accepting, and familiar in the other. The two are attracted to each other but are worried about the reception from their families. However, they bump into each other in school again at Percy when put into the same class together. Though Ellie does not feel out of place at Percy

because of her race, she does feel alienated from her new peers because of socio-economic differences. She and Jeremiah connect because of their similar feelings of isolation at school, and the loneliness they also experience at home. As an only child, Jeremiah lives in a large house with his often distant mother. Ellie's father is rarely home because of his time consuming job at the hospital. Ellie's closest relationship is with her sister Anne who lives in California. Their relationship cracks when Ellie tells Anne she is in love with a black boy. Because of Anne's response, Ellie fears her parents will also condemn her growing closeness with Miah.

As the novel progresses, Ellie and Miah spend increasing amounts of time with each other, both in and out of school. After sharing a book in history class, the teenagers start passing their afternoons together in Central Park. Girls in school whisper and giggle whenever they pass. Old white women in the park give them suspicious looks, even asking if Ellie is okay. They both know these responses are because they are in an interracial relationship. Determined to be together no matter what people think, Miah finally asks Ellie to come to his home to meet his father.

“Thing about white people,” Jeremiah's father tells him, “they know what everybody else is, but they don't know they're white” - “Maybe some know it” His father eyed him and smiled “When they walk into a party and everyone's black, they know it. Or when they get caught in Harlem after nightfall, they know it. But otherwise...” (102)

Though Miah's mother is surprised that Ellie is white, she welcomes her son's new girlfriend into her home with kindness and hospitality. Ellie and Miah spend many months hanging out and doing homework together at Miah's house, until Miah finally asks when Ellie will introduce him to her family. Ellie admits her fears about their response, and they commiserate about similarly complicated feelings regarding race, acceptance, and love in spite of familial and social differences.

One evening after Miah walks Ellie home, Ellie gives Miah her necklace and promises she will tell her parents about him that night. Overwhelmed by his feelings for Ellie, Miah runs through the park, unaware of the world around him. Forgetting his father's warning to never run in a white neighbourhood lest someone mistakenly suspect him of evil intent, Miah races through the snow, not heeding a policeman's call to stop running. Because Miah

does not obey the cop's instructions, he shoots and kills Miah, believing he is the young black man for whom they are searching.

The final chapters of the novel depict Ellie at Miah's funeral amidst all of his family and friends, and later, several years after Miah's death. Though their relationship was brief and ultimately abbreviated, Ellie continues to carry Miah in her heart.

“Once I asked Miah if he ever forgot he was black. No. I never forget, he said. But sometimes it doesn't matter-like I just am. Then he asked me if I ever forgot I was white. Sometimes, I said. And when you're forgetting, what color are you? No color. Then Miah looked away from me and said, We're different that way.” (180)

Racism is generally presented as this monolithic entity in America where every situation is always exactly the same. This is true in this novel. To classify it merely as a story of interracial romance is far less attributive than calling it a star-cross romance because the racial component is more intricate. For instance, feeling the pressure of racial expectations, Miah presents himself as simply another black kid from Brooklyn when actually his father is a successful filmmaker and his mother a successful writer. That both are new transfers to an elite academy in which Miah goes from a black-majority to a white-majority student population also significantly alters the state of the racial element in their romance. Racism is explored thematically.

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