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## A Critique of Cornel West's Politics For 'Black Intellectuals'<sup>1</sup>

Çelik EKMEKÇİ<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

In this study, multiculturalism is going to be the target literary-theoretical discipline in scrutinising the politics of 'Black Intellectuals' whose principles and characteristics are going to be discussed in terms of the consistency of the main argument pointed out by Cornel West in his article entitled: "New Cultural Politics of Difference." Thereby, the intended purpose will be aimed to be discussed whether West's politics for Black Intellectuals, whose features are produced under multicultural characteristics, are provided and represented or not? Furthermore, West's political attitude is scrutinised in the samples of literature written by 'Black Intellectuals.' Therefore, these characteristics, attributed to West's Black Intellectuals, are going to be analysed through variety of theoretical and academic sources. The primary literary sources will be Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Black Intellectuals, Black Feminism, Cornel West, "New Cultural Politics of Difference," *The Color Purple*, *Sula*.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was presented as a conference proceeding on 10th of April 2015, in the Fifth Undergraduate Conference on Anglo-American Literature: "Multiculturalism" at Bilkent University in Ankara. Then the content was improved, re-written and formed under current study.

<sup>2</sup> Istanbul Aydin University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Ph.D. Candidate, Istanbul-Turkey.

E-mail: [celikekmekci@hotmail.com](mailto:celikekmekci@hotmail.com), yazar ORCID numarası: [0000-0002-7123-2621](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7123-2621)

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## Cornel West'in 'Afro-Amerikan Entelektüeller' İçin Politikaları Üzerine Bir İnceleme

Çelik EKMEKÇİ

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### Özet

Çokkültürlülük bu çalışmada hedef teorik-edebi kuram olup 'Afro-Amerikan Entelektüellerin' politikaları ve içerikleri Cornel West'in "Farklılığın Yeni Kültürel Politikaları" ("New Cultural Politics of Difference") adlı makalesi üzerinden temel argüman olarak incelenecektir. Bu sebeple West'in 'Afro-Amerikan Entelektüellerinin' çokkültürlülük özelliklerini sağlayıp sağlamadığı bu çalışmanın amacı olarak gösterilecektir. Ayrıca West'in politik tavrı, Afro-Amerikan Entelektüeller tarafından yazılan edebi eserlerde incelenecektir. Böylece, bahsedilen özellikler West'in Afro-Amerikan Entelektüelleri üzerinden teorik ve akademik kaynaklar çerçevesinde çalışılacak olup birincil edebi kaynaklar Alice Walker'ın *The Color Purple*, ve Toni Morrison'un *Sula* adlı eserleridir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çokkültürlülük, Afro-Amerikan Entelektüeller, Afro-Amerikan Feminizm, Cornel West, "Farklılığın Yeni Kültürel Politikaları," *The Color Purple*, *Sula*.

### **A Critique of Cornel West's Politics For "Black Intellectuals"**

Cornel West in his "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," argues socio-political and cultural facets of multicultural economy in a way that he tries to show universal rights of blacks underestimated by whites; however, the crucial point for West is the fact that black intellectuality represented by whites does not show authentic characteristic features undergone by blacks. Therefore, black intellectuals, according to West, have significant responsibilities in true representation of blacks in multicultural economy. On this basis, Alice Walker, Tony Morrison and other 'Black Intellectuals,' share the same responsibility in their works through which they are able to represent the problems of blacks in general and the problematics of race, gender and identity in particular. Therefore, West's 'Black Intellectuals' have the same faith in representing true features of the multicultural issues of blacks. By depending upon West's groundbreaking work, primarily, the definition of multiculturalism and its political connection is expressed in that "[m]ulticulturalism is a fact of contemporary political life. Yet it is also an issue that threatens to undermine the viability of a modern democratic state, with its ideal of equal citizenship [...]" (Haddock & Sutch, 1). Multiculturalism is also defined as a system of principle which has its close initiation with nations as follows:

[t]he canon consists mainly of works that convey and sustain racism, patriarchy and imperialism and understate or exclude interests and accomplishments of blacks, Hispanics and other ethnic minorities and also the achievements of women, working class, popular culture, homosexuals and non-European civilizations. The demand is to open the canon so as to make it multicultural [...] (Abrams & Harpham, 39).

Therefore, as it is stated above, through this conceptualisation, multiculturalism arises and takes its place against the term "Eurocentric" (ibid.) Politically, it has been uttered that "[m]ulticultural designates the movement to redress what are asserted to be the errors and injustices of a history dominated by Europe-centered historians, so as to make it represent adequately the cultural

contributions of races and groups [...]” (39-40). Hence, it is understood that multiculturalism serves to cope with this Eurocentric oriented world despite its political corruption. Similarly, these multi-faceted dimensions of multiculturalism are further explicated in many ways. It has further been shown that “[m]ulticulturalism is a body of thought in political philosophy about the proper way to respond the cultural religious diversity” (Song, 1). In other explication, multiculturalism is identified as “the name for an approach that shows us another way of using knowledge to understand ideas and events” (Trotman, ix). From this perspective, these multicultural procedures in variety of socio-political circumstances take part in Cornel West’s “The New Cultural Politics of Difference<sup>3</sup>” as the core of the argument. On this basis, thematically, West in his essay, handles ‘Black Diaspora’ to represent cultural and political rights of blacks generally. Justifiably, in his statements West proclaims the fact that there are some cultural attitudes of blacks to erase the negative representation of the past which ignites the conflict between whites and blacks so it becomes the concern of multiculturalism. He further explicates that “[t]he initial Black Diaspora response was a mode of resistance that was moralistic in content and communal in character. That is the fight for representation and recognition highlighted moral judgements regarding Black ‘positive’ images over and against White supremacist stereotypes [...]” (qtd. in During, 262). Hence, ethnic, cultural and racial incidences are clarified under the decolonisation process. West states that the emergence of intellectual resistance takes its place within the issue of Black Diaspora. By doing so, under multiculturalism, new type of cultural-political critique originates especially by black intellectual women. He explicates this situation as follows:

[t]he decisive push of postmodern Black intellectuals toward a new cultural politics of difference has been made by the powerful critiques and constructive explorations of Black Diaspora women (e.g. Toni

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<sup>3</sup> Related quotations of Cornel West’s “The New Cultural Politics of Difference” are cited at *The Cultural Studies Reader* ed. by Simon During.

Morrison). [...]. In this regard, the Black Diaspora womanist critique has had a greater impact than the critiques that highlight exclusively class, age, sexual orientation, or nature [...] (qtd. in During, 263).

Thereby, if it is analysed from this perspective, it can explicitly be said that in the core of Black Diaspora, there is the issue of sexism, class oppression and racism. These issues are intermingled with one another and theoretically pointed out under black feminism. So, here, the aim is to solve these problems. Therefore, Alice Walker can be considered as a pioneer of this movement with her "Womanism." Basically, in her 'Womanist Prose,' Walker identifies herself as the spokesperson of blacks, who is aware of everything and this awareness is explicated by Lindsey Tucker, in her essay called "Alice Walker's Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text" as follows:

Alice Walker, aware of black women as a particularly muted group, has addressed herself in much of her work to the problem of the black woman as a creator.' In her "womanist" prose work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, for example, she describes those "grandmothers and mothers of ours ... not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (233). (qtd. in Tucker, 81)

In addition to this, it is further expressed that Walker's womanism has its close relationship with black race, gender and sexuality. Therefore, black intellectuals, especially black women writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have had the same purpose in that they wanted to show the problems of blacks throughout the years and so they wanted to present these problems in terms of race, gender and sexuality. As West states, they want to abolish the misrepresentation of Blacks as it took place in the past. To give an example, it is clear that in Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, black women are trying to endure much more difficulties than those of white women's. So, here is the core of Walker's argument. This example from the novel shows black women's presences and how they are humiliated severely at that time.

To give a specific example, in the novel, the protagonist, Celie, is a black woman who comes across with many obstacles and hardships; yet, she uses her power to be alive in white oriented world. Walker, in her novel, tries to point out that black women are under pressure. Here in this quotation, the same situation has been uttered against Celie as follows: “[...] Who you think you is? He say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all [...]” (Walker, 187). Likewise, in order to indicate black people’s situation which is highly inferior when it’s compared with that of whites’, the following quotation shows the inner thoughts of Celie about the destiny of black folks: “I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. I didn’t take long to realize I didn’t hardly know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or woman or a bush it don’t mean nothing if you don’t ast why you here, period [...]” (256). Moreover, it is also possible to observe such racial features and discriminative characteristics against blacks in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. In the novel, there are black characters who try to cope with the troubles and impending problematic circumstances and at the same time, they strive for being ‘a self’ in the world they live in. Thereby, in one of her conversations, Sula states the hardships of black people generally: ““I know what every colored woman in this country is doing.” “What’s that?” “Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those red-woods. I sure did live in this world” [...]” (Morrison, 143). As a result, by depending upon the explications above, it can explicitly be stated that Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, write about the “Black Feminism.” For them, Black feminism is the liberation of black women and the freedom of all people. This liberation is further pointed out through the activist purposes under which the core of the argument about race and gender are clarified. Kimberly Springer mentions about this situation below:

Black feminists writing then and now struggle with advocating a love for Black men while passionately hating Black sexism. And while older Black feminists are wrestling with past dilemmas and strive to impart knowledge about the struggle for racial and gender

justice, younger Black women are also joining the dialogue through their activism, music, and writing. (Springer, 1060)

As it is stated previously, in “Black Feminism,” there are discrepancies between the black women and the white women in that, black women try to endure much more hardships and obstacles than white women. For black women, the term called “inequality” is much wider; it’s at the top for black women. Thus, black feminists arise to support their rights. As a result, Walker’s panoramic black world is a good example that goes one to one correspondence with the issue of ‘Black Intellectuals’ and its core manifestation in accordance with West’s ‘Black Intellectual’ term. Because, these literary explications above show that in literature, these discriminative elements of black race are illuminated in tandem with the inner thoughts of blacks in that they have to escape from where they live, in other words, they have to move away by force to other places and thereby this circumstance leads to the modern black diaspora issue. Hence, today’s negative racial attitude shows itself in another form under the exploitation of the victims as secondary race and this ideological apparatus serves for the common ideology of white mentality. As West states: “The modern Black diaspora problematic of invisibility and namelessness can be understood as the condition of relative lack of Black power to present themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by white supremacist ideologies [...]” (qtd. In During, 261). Additionally, West states that these procedures are called ‘existential challenge’ for the colored people because, they are somehow put into trial for survival in euro-centric white oriented world thus, colored people have burdens, they are segregated and they are shown inferior. For this mentality, it is said that “[...] in the court of criticism and art- or any matters regarding the life of the mind-people of colour are guilty [...] until proven innocent [...]” (qtd. in During, 265). Thereby, this circumstance can be considered as the striking point summarising the partial dualism between blacks and whites: “[w]e identify sexual violence in immigrant of color and Third World communities as cultural, while failing to recognize the cultural aspects of sexual violence affecting mainstream white women. This is related to the general failure to look at the behavior of white persons

as cultural, while always ascribing the label of culture to the behavior of minority groups” (Volpp, 1089). West wants to stress upon the issue that these are the things that multicultural politics of difference try to be active in this problematic atmosphere because, on condition that blacks and whites gather together, behave mutually and show resistance thoroughly then modern activist communities are able to act together in terms of advocating the rights and give political challenge. This situation is summarized below by West as follows:

The new cultural politics of difference can thrive only if there are communities, groups, organizations, institutions, subcultures and networks of people of colour who cultivate critical sensibilities [...]. This cultural capital of people of colour- with its emphasis on self-confidence, discipline, perseverance and subcultures of criticism- also tries to meet the existential requirement. Both are mutually reinforcing [...] that guide to the creative response to the political challenge [...]. (qtd. in During, 266-267)

Consequently, what West tries to create in his “New Cultural Politics of Difference” is the new type of ‘Black Intellectuality’ whose contents depend upon new scope of free mentality favoring the questioning of old Black representations. West’s panorama of new scope of black representation is thoroughly thought to be appropriate for blacks so that Black Intellectuals’ challenge will focus upon producing the true representation of blacks in terms of theoretical and cultural contents. West wants to point out that he is totally disagree with the Wasp representation of Black mainstream culture. Therefore, it may be considered as one of the reasons why West supports ‘Black Intellectuals’ in giving reference to Walker and Morrison because he already knows that these ‘Black Intellectuals’ are the pioneers of ‘Black Feminism’ whose ties are connected to mentioned intellectual concept. This situation is further explained as follows:

Black feminism is also composed of a body of knowledge and understanding that positions itself as critical theory to criticize and address social problems. It further argues that Black women intellectuals are



central to the production of Black feminist thought. Black feminists contend that there can be no separation of ideas from experience and that Black feminism is not a set of abstract principles, but it is a set of ideas that come directly from the historical and contemporary experience of Black women. (Woodard & Mastin, 268)

In conclusion, it is asserted that West's argument depends upon 'Black Intellectuality Ideology' to express the core of the argument transmitted explicitly under the illumination of Black Feminists. In West's theoretical essay, it is possible to find political reasons of West's discussion on multiculturalism having significant phases. These are the phases for cultural politics of difference: first one is 'Humanism' and the second one is 'Historical emergence of USA' and the last one is the 'Decolonisation.' Toward the end of his essay, West discusses the issue of "Black Diaspora" which is explicated under 'Black Intellectualisation.' Thereto, the core point is to justify the rights of Blacks. Thus, West, in his intellectual conceptualisation, points out the fact that there are some cultural attitudes of blacks to erase the negative representation of the past which causes the conflict between whites and blacks so, it becomes the concern of multiculturalism. On the other hand, it is obvious that there are political reasons to hold this idea through which West intentionally makes use of them all by depending upon the argumentation. It is highly probable that this situation has been discussed for the predefined multicultural concepts for 'Black Intellectuals' whose features are politically oriented and whose outcomes depend upon literature produced by blacks purposefully. These arguments, West asserted, are somehow seen as an inevitable cause of Eurocentric power which can be observed as the sense of 'Multiculturalism in Nationalism,' or at least the common intention has been regulated accordingly. However, it should also be stressed that West's consistency to hold mentioned multicultural idea in keeping it with 'Black Intellectuals' may somehow be seen controversial because, it might be thought that no matter how West tries to be fair and impartial to evaluate the things that he uttered for the "Intellectual Black Generation," about the survival of 'Black Race' and the steps of 'Black Intellectuals,' it cannot be done properly and objectively for he

belongs to the same “Race<sup>4</sup>,” he has the same “Skin Color<sup>5</sup>,” and he has the same “Kinship<sup>6</sup>” which were all hindered, degraded and made inferior by Eurocentric scope, most importantly West’s activist personality in upholding the rights of blacks cannot be underestimated. Surprisingly, what is explicitly observed that West does not present racist way of justifying his argument in his “New

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<sup>4</sup> The same thematic point concerning the problems of “Race” is scrutinised in Percival Everett’s *Erasure* in that in the novel the narrator ‘Monk’ is a black guy who is intellectual because he is a writer however, there is a problem because of his race in that whites accuse him of being not white enough to be an intellectual similarly such problem is also observed from the blacks in that he is so alienated from his own race that he is not black enough to express the burdens of blacks. Therefore ‘Monk’ feels himself in between he is neither accepted by blacks nor by whites. He expresses his situation as follows: “I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white police in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. [...] While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly because I felt I had to prove I was black enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not black enough. [...]” (Everett, pp. 1-2).

<sup>5</sup> The same thematic point concerning the problems of “Skin Color” is expressed in a poem called “Death Bells” written by Stephen Bess to indicate lamented black souls as follows:

The Death Angel finally came  
She wasn’t nearly as cold and  
dreadful as her name  
She had smooth, black skin  
and her breath was sweet  
She kissed me just once before I fell asleep  
(Bess, 22).

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the same thematic point concerning the problems of ‘Kinship’ is discussed in Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* in that in the novel, the narrator Dana has dyslexia through which she builds her kinship so that she time-travels and provides her familial tie of kinship with her ancestors. However, the crucial point expressed in the novel as the core of the argument that Dana through her illness enabling her to travel from 20<sup>th</sup> century to early decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century in sci-fi content, observing and testifying racial discriminations and segregations between blacks and whites in the period of slavery. On this basis, such derogatory slurs are abundantly expressed in the novel as follows: ““Your mother always call black people niggers, Rufe?” [...] “I’m a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that’s it”” (Butler, 25).

Cultural Politics of Difference,” although there are racist examples quoted from the target novels in the exemplification of these main concepts. Hence, what West wants to do is to show in his admired manifesto that there will be a multicultural atmosphere through which every nation, every race, every gender is seen equally under proper multicultural disciplines. West prefers politically oriented multicultural understanding of national concepts whose regulations are made under Black Feminist Diaspora rather than having racist attributions. Finally, in this article, the intended purpose is the fact that multiculturalism, as a literary theory, is aimed to be expressed as a literary discipline whose theoretical principles and characteristics are scrutinised in terms of ‘Black Feminist Intellectuals’ which are pointed out under the illumination of Cornel West’s “New Cultural Politics of Difference.” Hereto, this circumstance has been evaluated under these multicultural concepts for ‘Black Intellectuals’ whose features are politically oriented. As a result, these critical questions about the origination, source and illumination of the thoughts are expressed discussed through variety of subjects from racism to Eurocentric ideology, from multiculturalism to nationalism to express and indicate West’s consistent attitude in handling the crucial points he has long aimed for impartially.

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