

Conflict of Double Consciousness and Rejection of Power Structures in African American Literature

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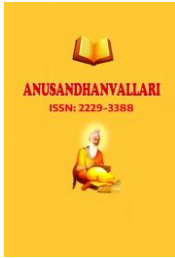
Abstract:

The narratives of African American literature focus on the issues of slavery, inequality, identity crisis and racism. This research paper details the conflict of double consciousness and rejection of power structures in African American literature in reference to works such as *Invisible Man*, *Twelve Years a Slave* and *Black Boy*. The complexity of assurance to self-identity is evident in the characterization of the characters in works of African American writers. The paper aims at understanding the depiction of characters and their relevance to theme of discrimination, racial injustice caused by power structures and inferior status in the society. The cruelty of colonial hegemony is deeply rooted in the African American literature which portrays the hardships and difficulties endured by people of African American communities.

Keywords: Racism, negritude, double consciousness, power struggles, identity crisis, white supremacy.

Introduction:

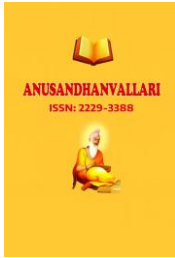
The books and novels of African American literature are works produced by the group of people who are identified as Americans of African descendants. The writers themselves have experienced the shift in social, political and economic condition of their lives in the power conflicted society. The novels represent the ideology of racial segregation, white supremacy, black identity, racism and social injustice. The formation of African American literature was the result of colonialism and imperialism carried out by British empire. Colonies of African countries were captured and colonized by the colonizer's which resulted in cruel issues of slavery and slave trades. African American writers keenly observed and depicted the slave narratives of colonies and their enslaved people. The colonized population began to image themselves through lens of white people leading to establishment of new ideology called white supremacy. The concept of white supremacy is evident in major works of African American writers such as in Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Amiri Baraka's *Blues people: Negro Music in White America* and Maya Angelou's *I Know why the caged bird sings*.



The influence of white supremacy is reflected in language, colour, power and culture which also aims at degrading the cultural norms of African American people. The communities of African American identity had suffered a lot in different aspects throughout their lifetime starting from education, cultural values, equal rights till acceptance of their existence with only prejudice. The dual identity of being American and Negro affected the people in different ways and it also created identity crisis. In Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, the psychological effect of colonialism is explained where the division of white man and black man primarily established the difference in mankind and portrayed white man as superior and black man as inferior one in the society. The constant and continuous control, domination over black people forced them to think themselves as weak group or uncivilized group in comparison to white people. The black identity was defined as savage group of mankind, this image enforced black people to imitate and act like white people so that they can get rid of the cruel injustices occurred to them based on skin colour. Joseph Conrad in his work *Heart of Darkness* have described the natives of African continent as barbaric and uncivilized group of people, this work has received many criticisms for stereotyping and portraying black people as inferior beings with prejudice of white supremacy by author himself. Mimicry is one of the important terms in post- colonial literature which describes the process of imitation carried out by black people where they imitate culture, standards, language of white people to believe themselves as respectable and civilized people. Black people with African and African American identities are encouraged to follow new form of attitude called 'Negritude' which develops black consciousness promoting their culture, heritage, history and reject the ideology of uncivilization or barbaric groups. Negritude helped black people to understand the fact that they too have their own origin, traditional values, language, art forms which was not inferior to white man's cultural norms. It is also called as anti- colonial term as it fights backs against the social injustice of racism, colour discrimination, and ideologies of colonialism created by white man is also rejected with the help of the conceptual theory negritude. Eurocentrism is another crucial ideology which shaped the supremacy of white race. Britishers and white people began to think themselves as superior in the whole world they dominated texts of oriental countries and considered themselves as educated, civilized people who could help colonized and black people with their language, culture and traditional values. Even during colonialism, the colonizers justified their cruel act of colonization as process of civilizing the new world comprised of all other countries and continents except Europe. The writers of African American literature notes down all assaults and tortures imposed on black Americans and black people. Slave narratives are one of the common themes evident in works of African American texts, slave trade was common during the time of colonialism in Africa as Africans were captivated by vile colonizers who sold black human beings in market where white man was given the cruel privilege of buying black people as their slaves or servants. In this paper the cultural manipulation imposed on black people and their issues related to racial identity are discussed to understand the evolution from acceptance of double consciousness to rejection of power structures. With the help of eminent writers and critics, the negligence over human rights and racial injustice was abolished in the society. The cultural fusion of Africans and Americans led to create this new community called African Americans who gracefully endured their journey of hardships, sufferings without failing to achieve their sense of freedom and their existence as humans with equal rights, respect and values. African American writers pictured many real stories of black people in their works to ensure the readers to acknowledge the difficulties experienced by black community and how far they have come to live a peaceful life of liberty and equality.

Conflict Of Double Consciousness:

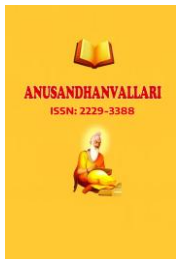
When the social identity of and individual splits into two different identities it refers to double consciousness. In post- colonial and African American literature double consciousness is one of the key factors faced by the black people who begin to look themselves through mirror of the colonizers or the white man. African Americans are



in constant struggle in choosing their identity between Black and Americans. In this process one becomes ignorant about reality and own roots of origin which leads to next step of imitating the white man. After many attempts black man understands that he can never turn himself into white community as he doesn't belong there and finally embraces his black identity and connect to their origin, cultural norms. Solomon Northup's *Twelve years a slave* encounter the autobiographical experiences of author in which he depicts his sense of double consciousness. When he was a free man in North he was identified as respectful African American citizen but when there was the shift to South he was identified as a slave or servant to serve the white people. This dual identity disturbs the psychological understanding of an individual which changes in different places due to the colonial hegemony. He was treated as 'others' in colonies of South and lost his sense of being self or equal man of the society. It was new for him to experience the world of slavery, slave trade and identity of being other in his own nation. He also adds that the generation, children of white community were taught to ill-treat and view black, African Americans as uncivilized as inferior set of human populations which resulted in prejudice over black identity. The concept of twoness is evident in *Black Boy* written by Richard Wright as the protagonist of the book lived in racial society which oppressed Black Americans and it was a period of time then when African Americans were in danger due to crimes offended to eliminate them by the white people. The book portrays the difficult relationship between the white Americans and the Black Americans and how even strict laws were created to maintain these differences. Black Americans were not given right to seek jobs as they were rejected by white men companies and they were restricted to not marry white Americans which clearly employed the practice of racial politics. The racial tensions among two races created the ideology of double consciousness in mind of protagonist as he is considered as inferior one and lacks the rights, power, privilege of white man. The most listed work of African American literature includes Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the protagonist identify himself as black man in the white society. Throughout the novel the protagonist only thinks and analyses his situation like a white man through perspective of white society. Even protagonist's grandfather in his deathbed asked protagonist to obey the orders of white people which made to realize that white people were his masters and to think through lens of white man to survive in this racial society. Most of the African American writer's stress on the issue of double consciousness in their works as it deeply portrays the actions and psychological understandings of life.

Rejection Of Power Structures:

Colonial hegemony has divided the society into two halves resulting in binary structure where white people were considered as superior and black people as inferior. This split in society after colonialism had after affects creating differences, injustice, racial tension among African Americans and black communities. The attempt of fighting against such superstructures of white supremacy was committed by brave leaders and people of African American communities. This revolt against prejudices and power structure in the society was witnessed by writers who incorporated it in their narratives. In *Black Boy*, Richard explains the power structures of the society in which he lived as young boy where whites were positioned as superstructures whereas blacks were base who had no privilege of living an even a normal life. He witnesses the cruelty of Jim Crow racism which was widespread in American society, it aimed at discriminating African Americans through its vile racial law systems. In the book protagonist joins a communist party and hopes to find revolutionary solution to the racial injustices but he ends up being with many black members who are concentrating on imitating and behaving like dominant white Americans. In this battle of domination, narrator chooses to use his power of writing to share his experiences of rejection of power structures in white society. Solomon Northup's *Twelve years a Slave* explores the hegemony of ideologies and power of American society engraved with pathetic stories of black people and African Americans. Though the protagonist was a free liberal man in North who lived his life happily with his family with dignity and earned money through his violin performances. But in South due to the power politics, he was



kidnapped as slave and had no power to express his thought, ideas. The white landlords forced black people to serve them which was brutal and unimaginable pain of sufferings to African Americans. The ideology of master and slave itself establish the power structures endured by whites and blacks of America. With identity of being master an individual forgets that he is just a man and begins to lead his life as supreme leader of power, this makes the slave to acknowledge themselves as weak, inferior and voiceless. The slave narratives focus on teaching the real image of slavery as well as horrors in lives of black people which deprived their basic rights to live like fellow human being. The voice of slaves and black Americans were suppressed by white men who dominated them with cruel punishments and laws. The class struggle is also witnessed in *Twelve years a slave* as blacks is considered the lower class or base of the society and whites are considered the upper class or superstructures who run the society. The division of upper class and lower-class created the turmoil of racism, class struggle and dominance of power structures. Social class system determines the position of people based on their race, power of production and in American society whites were the law makers with power of manufacturing of goods and production. Blacks were viewed as lower rank of class according to social elites of the society. Ralph Ellison in his one of the greatest work *Invisible Man* accounts the role of power in the American society where the unnamed protagonist survives to live a normal life like a white man. Due to the dominance of whites, the narrator was constantly questioning his existence with self-doubts and ambiguity. Throughout the storyline the narrator is in urge to witness his existence to whites as he was aware of the power conflict of American society. In order to enter college, he had to deliver speech and participate in Battle Royal which was a boxing competition where black men were blind folded to fight with each other. This incident showcases the hardships endured by black Americans and how white men were entertained by watching these battle royals. The lives of black were just matter of entertainment for white Americans. Through such incidents it is evident that power played major role in lives of African Americans. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* finally realized that he cannot tolerate racism and control of his life by whites so he decides to live in underground where there is no power structures or discrimination.

Conclusion:

African Americans and black people have suffered the issues of cultural identity, injustice, dual identity, racism, racial discrimination and white supremacy. The major works of African American writers keenly observed and portrayed the harsh realities of slavery, slave trades and pathetic life experienced by black Americans. The importance of equality, liberty and freedom is acknowledged only through understanding the real difficulties faced by slaves or black people. With the help of analysing various African American texts readers can witness that ignorance towards humanity and power structures can destroy lives of many people and cause vile social practices.

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