



Fabrication of the Black identity as others and Narration of biased social construction of Race in the select works of African American Literature

¹N. Divya Chezian, ²Dr. G. Beulah

¹Research Scholar PG & Research Department of English Sri Meenakshi Government College for Women
Madurai

²Associate Professor PG & Research Department of English Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College for
Women Madurai

Abstract: African American identity emerged after the inculcation of colonialism in various colonies of America where generations of the African descendants settled down creating a new identity and race. This research paper aims at analysing the segregation of black community and labelling them as others through the lens of white colonizers. It also deconstructs the structural hegemony enforced due to white supremacy on the black people leading to formation of biased conflict between the white colonizers and the black colonized people. The research paper focuses on the three major works of African American literature as follows *Twelve Years a slave* by Solomon Northup, *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison which shares similar plotline of racism, slavery, slave trade, invisibility and identity crisis of new race called African American community. The narrative techniques used in the three selected works are first person perspective along with the literary device of stream of consciousness. It highlights the hardships and difficulties experienced by the African American people due to oppression and marginalization of black community.

Keywords: White space, racial prejudice, existentialism, marginalization, black identity.

Introduction:

Colonialism is the process of enforcing the imperial control over various colonies through social and political power structures. The British Empire strategically mapped certain parts of world as new world to exploit its resources and own the territories through structural hegemony. In the selected works the exploits of colonialism continued in the post-colonial world is disserted through characters, plots, sub plots, narration, literary devices and themes. Post colonialism is one of the major studies included in the literary theory and contemporary literary studies which addresses on the various issues faced by the colonized people all across the world by the white supremacist. The framework of postcolonialism refers to the impact of colonialism on the basis of psychologic, economic and binary difference between colonizers and colonized people. The trajectory of colonial rule led to racial prejudices, multiculturalism, double consciousness and white supremacy. The white colonizers used the tag of civilization of colonized community to escape from their cruel reality of exploitation and manipulation on the colonies. The study of postcolonialism led to the deconstructing the texts of writers who described the story of oppressed people through their fictional characters. The major concepts of postcolonialism are as follows imitation or mimicry which explained the burden of colonized people to imitate the language and cultural values of white people due to their superiority. After colonialism many people migrated from third world to first world countries to gain the social status of upliftment and during this phase the generations of immigrants faced the issue of hybridity and identity crisis as they belong to two spaces of ancestral native and new land of westerners. This resulted in lack of consistent identity of self as they shifted from native to western culture and led to multiculturalism. Diasporic study is branch of postcolonialism as it emphasizes on the narratives of migrants and their sufferings in the western land. They live in a third space with nostalgia of past memories in native land and in contrast trying to fit in the foreign land. The interdisciplinary aspects of postcolonialism aids to theories of feminism, Marxism and cultural studies. It explains the key term of black feminism where black women are



oppressed twice for their racial colour and gender. The theory of hegemony was first coined in Marxism but soon it became one of the key terms in the context of postcolonialism as White colonizers instructed and enforced their rules, education system, language and cultural beliefs on the colonized people. They promoted the structural ideology of their superiority by stating that their tongue of language was rich in comparison to languages of colonies and they stated that the western culture was civilized and cultural values of colonies were uncivilized and backwards. African American literature emerged after colonialism in the post-colonial era which narrates the discrimination and segregation of black people in the white spaces. It also portrays the settlement of the mixed race after the long journey of slavery and slave trade. Before the abolition of slavery black people were treated as servants and were punished cruelly by the white colonizers. The slave trade was legally practiced by the whites where voiceless black ethnic people were traded as slaves to various plantation hubs across different parts of America and European countries. Due to the racial hierarchy the generations of black people were deprived of equality, basic rights of education, social status and identity. Black community were generalized as collective identity without any recognition of individual identity. After years of oppression black people fought against white supremacy with the key aspect negritude which insisted on the celebration of rich cultural heritage of African language, cuisine, ethnic wear and spiritual existence. In contrary many Black people were forced to believe that they were inferior than the white oppressors due to constant domination. The selected two works as such *Black Boy* and *Invisible Man* was published in the modern age which also highlights the impact of world wars and its major theories such as existentialism, absurdism and stream of consciousness. The protagonists of these works suffer from existentialism due to the discrimination and ill treatment of white men on them. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* discusses about both existential crisis and absurdism experienced by the narrator of the text. The narrator was a black man who was constantly degraded by the oppressors and left him in the state of identity crisis. The narrative technique of stream of consciousness is another major literary device which was popularized in the modern age where psychology was given importance. With the publication of Freud's various theories and texts of psychology writers were inspired to write the first-person narration of protagonist through the lens of stream of consciousness which expressed the flow of emotions of character and aided to understanding the dynamics of emotional and psychological depth.

Fabrication of the Black Identity as others in White spaces:

The effects of colonialism prevailed in the postcolonial era through social and political institutions of the society. The racial differences concentrated more on the structured ideology rather than the natural formation of races. It promoted the cruel act of slavery, inequality and discrimination as part of racial systems. The binary social construction was followed as guide to distinguish between the whites and the blacks and nominating the roles of master and slaves. Due to this fabrication of black identity, the diverse ethnic groups of African community were collectively identified as black people. Their rich heritage of distinct features was generalized as groups of uncivilized black community by the white colonizers. The major theorist of postcolonialism Franz Fanon analysed on the psychological trajectory of the colonized people of African who where black skinned but were wearing the white masks which aids to the theory of double consciousness. He explains that due to constant domination and colonial rule black people begin to internalize themselves as inferior beings and begin to imitate the mannerism, culture, costumes and tongue of westerners to view themselves an equal being. This is one of the common traits of psychological impact of colonialism where the colonized people where trained to mimic the white colonists as superior model to them. The colonizers were successful to make the colonized people believe that they were uncivilized and inferior. But after years of revolution, awareness and acknowledgement Black people understood the importance of their own rich culture, language and ethnicity which led to resistance against colonialism.

In the *Twelve years a slave*, the narration of narrator's life story depicts the horrors of slave trade and fragmentation of reality through the cultural power structures of colonialism. It is a slave narrative which accounts on the life of educated black man who was kidnapped because of his black identity and sold in slave trade. The



act of slavery was fantasized by the white colonists as it benefited them with favours of free labours and servants to serve them. The autobiographical element uplifts the context of the work as it exposed the evil structures and establishments of white man to exploit and manipulate the life of black community. This work analyses on the theme of identity crisis as before becoming a slave, the narrator was identified as literate violinist who was respectable husband and father. When he was tagged as slave his value and identity was replaced by torture and abuse. He was just viewed as a product sold in slave trade and later owned by his master to ill treat him. The colonizers resisted themselves from accepting the reality that even blacks were educated and were civilized just like them. The narrator has become the slave and free labour to his master which shows the common element of slave narratives. Slavery was also one of the major social issues which paved way for human trafficking where women and children were sexually abused. The concept of black feminism emerged here where black women were socially suppressed for their racial and gender identity by the patriarchal white men. The female slave named Patsey works on the Epps Plantation and also victim of double oppression of race and gender. Her value is based only on the hard labour that she does to the plantations and humans traded as slaves are just replaced by other slaves. This business of slavery and slave trade encouraged white colonists to stereotype that the people of African race are naturally evolved to do such extreme labour as slaves. Patsey is sexually abused several times by her master Edwin Epps who exploits her body without consent. The western world was also following the patriarchal structure so the mistress of Edwin Epps couldn't directly confront him for ignorance so she traumatizes Patsey with insults and hard labour. This portrays the passive way of dominance even when white women herself were oppressed by her men she instils the cruel act of domination on black woman. White masters punished their slaves by whipping them which also explains their control over bodies of black people to show their supremacy. Slaves were traded at any time and families were separated from each other even children were separated from their mothers. Colonists changed the real identity such as their names to suppress their roots, origin and past life. Slaves were forced to follow rules of their masters and even asked for permissions to talk or do any action. Due to this daily practice of exploitations many slaves began to please their masters with charm because they viewed it as the only source of survival with less violence. As it benefitted them from escaping constant whipping, physical abuse and security of sources such as food, shelter and family. The narrator uses the weapon of silence to analyse the whole scenario of slavery, violence and the relationship between the master and slave. He became voiceless despite of his literate status to survive for years under supervision of white colonists. It greatly affected the psychological aspects of mind of slaves as they were never free to express their emotions and ideas. The suppressed thoughts and desires left them voiceless which questioned their existence of life. After years of slavery, blacks were unable to understand their real needs, value, identity and their freedom of speech.

The internal conflict of identifying the real character of oneself is the battle between the stereotypes of the world and true meaning of individuals life. In the novel *Black Boy*, the protagonist recognizes himself as an individual from his childhood but the white spaces identify him as a black boy by rejecting his talents, behaviour and uniqueness. Since childhood he is treated inferiorly by the white people which confuses him as a child. He also observes his fellow's family members, friends and neighbour who belongs to black community are hiding their real emotions to cope up with the discrimination imposed on them by the whites. As a child he was curious and angry at the same time to understand the hierarchy and power structure of the society where whites were privileged with all luxuries and blacks were deprived from basic respect and rights. The social issues of poverty, decline of education and legal systems of discrimination made him inferior and created identity crisis. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* narrates the hardships experienced by the narrator who tried to fit in the white space but ended up accepting the reality of rejection. The symbolism of invisibility and ignorance is evident in the narratives of African American literature as the white supremacist controls the existence of blacks. The narrator feels invisible as an individual in white spaces due to his black identity and racial injustice.



Biased Social Construction of Race:

The cultural and social norms of society have constructed various structures to ensure its dominance and hierarchy over the weaker sections and marginalized groups. The narrator in *Invisible Man* is humiliated by the white men during his admission in the college. The white men organize the royal battle to satisfy their ego of superiority by forcing young black men to blindfold and fight among each other. This cruel act is viewed as entertainment where lives of black people is physically and psychologically hurt. They view humiliation of black people as a pleasure to promote their dominance. Such biased social practices enforced on the black community leads to the acceptance of biased class and race conflicts. The narrator sees himself through lens of white men and tries to mimic the white men at the college. At the end with continuous rejections and decline of approval at college he decides to join political party where again his ideas and speech are collectively identified as black man rather than an individual ideology. He hides in the underground basement by rejecting the biased socially structured power systems. Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a slave* questions such socially constructed ideology which tags one group as superior and another as inferior. Such generalized ideas control the actions, behaviour and beliefs of different categories. Black identity was believed to feel intellectually low than white people and they were treated like a property or product which was disposed soon with arrival of new slave. This research paper come to the findings that the constructed value systems and class conflicts adds to the growth of evil acts of slavery, discrimination and oppression as it shapes the identity, laws, roles of certain group in which the power structures took the advantage of supremacy.

Conclusion:

The exploitations of slavery and slave trade are witnessed in the popular narratives of African American Literature and the decolonization of white influences are also majorly prevailing through the acknowledgement of characters. This study gave significance to the ideology of black identity labelled on the black community to treat them inferiorly and manipulate them with the metanarratives of civilization, religion and social class systems. This research paper concluded that the structural ideologies created by the binary system of class, gender, race and ethnicity lead to the years of social issues and abuses experienced by the weaker counterpart of the structure. The study of selected novels of African American texts provides the future scopes such as exploring the psychological trajectory of both colonizers and colonized black people and resistance of black people and their evolution from discrimination to celebration of their rich cultural heritage.

Reference:

- [1] -Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995.
- [2] -Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years A Slave*. London: William Collins, 2014.
- [3] -Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York, 1945.
- [4] -Nayar, K, Pramod. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson Longman: Delhi, 2008.
- [5] -African American Literary Study in the 1990s. Eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., And Patricia Redmond. University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- [6] -African American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests. Edited By Alma Dawson and Connie Van Fleet –Libraries Unlimited, Westport, Connecticut, London, 2004.