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Re-interrogating the Theme of Identity in Afro-American Literature

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Literature has been a powerful instrument for social change. It documents the historical attempts that people have made to reach their rightful place in destiny in the face of oppression and discrimination at different levels. The fight against forces of oppression such as race, class and gender has been a never ending process despite the loud claims of the so-called establishment of equality and justice. The greatness of man in all our history is evaluated in terms of his resoluteness and courage to question the damaging forces which perpetuate and sponsor discrimination in one form or the other. Silence is guilt where fearless speech is a basic courage. Be it Negro in the west or Dalit in the East, it is the spirit of rebellion or resistance in the face of oppression marks them distinguishable different from others. All great literatures of today invariably aim at capturing those moments of man's continual struggle for freedom and independence while our established critical theories try to evaluate those proclaimed values

Broadly speaking , Afro- American writings reflect on the experience of the oppressed people who have been victimized by the forces which are either politically motivated or socially engineered. This paper proposes to look into different dimensions of the experience of neglect, subjugation, oppression, discrimination and isolation in order to collectively conceive the basic questions involved in our understanding of human life and destiny. Also, it aims at scrutinizing different historical, cultural, socio-political, critical and generic dimensions of the terms 'freedom' and 'identity' and their relation to the context of modern India today. It is expected that a detailed analysis of the writings of Afro-American Literature would enhance our understanding of human dilemma and external and international complexities attached to it and that comprehensive understanding would widen the horizon of our knowledge and experience. Invariably, many writers of Afro-American origin tend to focus on a gamut of issues which include the issue of slavery, segregation, racism and oppression, the impact of double consciousness, the influence of musical tradition and the goal towards a new literature All the above mentioned concepts are intricately linked to the theme of 'freedom' and 'self-expression'.

'Freedom' is an essentially contested concept for which thousands have fought and millions have been sacrificed. It has been a subject of intense debate engaging academic minds for generations. It attracts numerous different interpretations by different philosophies and schools of thought. The love of freedom, the desire to possess unrestricted scope to live and grow, is a basic, legitimate ever-present hunger of human heart. The idea of freedom is one that each epoch reshapes in its own liking. The question of freedom, in general sense, deals with the description of philosophical, judicial, political, economic and societal system in which 'freedom' displays itself rapidly and differently. It implies that there will always be understandably distinct and disputed versions of freedom that are inconsistent with each other. There is no single, universal and objectively 'correct' meaning of freedom expressed anywhere in the annals of human history. It is often perceived to be a terrain of conflict. Afro-American writings illustrate this conflict in multiple ways.

Toni Morrison, one of the representative writers of Afro-American origin, says that "there is no denial of the truth that the spirit of pursuit of liberty in an individual is often understood as self-realization or self-determination". This pursuit is towards seeking positive

freedom. The concept of positive freedom implies an individual's right to pursue happiness to such an extent that a person thinks the best. This right involves guarantees that ensure that no person is denied of opportunities on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, or creed. Such guarantees are political in origin and presume the existence of another guarantee: the right to participate in political decisions that shape the structure of opportunities in any civilized society. Positive freedom lies in individual's efforts to do whatever an individual deems fit in order to reach his/her rightful place in destiny. The sense of determinism, determination, direction, discipline and dignity are the hallmarks of positive freedom. Negative freedom implies an individual's liberation from a confinement. This confinement may be a 'shackle' or 'prison' or 'negativism' or 'inferiority complex' which might be internal or external or a mix of both. Freedom from these confinements is perceived to be negative freedom. In other words, 'getting liberated' from the restrictions which are external such as social, political, economic and any other restrictions.

Afro-American writing is historically committed to raise some uncomfortable questions and through which it raises greater degree of consciousness in Humanity with reference to the suffering of the Afro-Americans in white dominated America. It also reflects on the insatiable hunger of the enslaved for freedom and equality and their anger against the violence and injustice. Afro-American attempts to revive the native culture which has faced the onslaught after the forced migration and regrouping of the dislocated and displaced people are some of the themes which bring so much of passion and vigor to their writings. In this aspect, it is worth an attempt to recollect the contributions and claims of Toni Morrison and examine them in the light of the analysis of a noted critic Henry Louis Gates which offers us fresh insights into the complexities surrounding 'identity constructions'.

Morrison in her introduction to *The Bluest Eye* asserts a fact that 'all good art has been political' and further she adds that the black artist has a responsibility to the black community. The purpose of her writing is to capture something that defines what makes 'a book black' and that has nothing to do with whether the people in the book are black or not. In Morrison's opinion one of the characteristics of black writers is 'a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends'. Her novels 'bear witness' to the experience of the black community and blacks in that community and in her attempt to explain conditions of the black and their aspirations for freedom and justice, Morrison uses a kind of language which defines her as a writer with an extraordinary degree of sensitivity even in terms of language use. Her language reflects the social reality that the blacks were subjected to. Morrison says: The language, only the languageit is the thing that black people love so much – the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It is a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and ear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen is to lose that language. There are certain things I can't say without recourse to my language' (53)

The second novel novel *Sula* (1973) marks her as a significant literary voice in America. This novel reflects a shift in mood of society at large. Morrison shifts the focus from mass struggle for black consciousness to the personal struggle for self-realization and affirmation. The quest to know about one's own self would empower an individual with better understanding of the present and future. It is a novel about ambiguity. It questions and examines the terms 'good' and 'evil' through the language of paradox. Morrison believes that our language is inadequate to express the mysteries of human emotions and relationships. All sorts of social conventions are mere restrictions upon the free will. While exploring the ways in which people try to make meaning of lives filled with conflicts over race, gender, and simple idiosyncratic points of view, *Sula* refuses to offer easy answers to the complexities of

life. By doing so, she stands as an embodiment of ambiguity, beauty and terror of life both in its triumphs and horrors. Her third novel, *Song of Solomon* suggests an idea that in order to establish higher quality of existence one should get in touch with her heritage. This connectedness would help a person comprehend and appreciate her own self. This is an essential condition for self fulfillment and freedom.

The fourth novel *Tar Baby* (1981) examines the relationship between blacks and whites, men and women, and civilization and nature. Her fifth novel *Beloved* (1987) dramatizes a haunting amalgam of the past and present experiences of an escaped female slave, tracing the heroine's quest for meaning and wholeness in slavery and in freedom. This work can rightfully be called the finest work of Morrison for its quality, treatment of theme and presentation of African American experience in a language of poise. In *Jazz* (1992) Morrison uses the mode of jazz to depict the experience of black community in the city of New York during the 1920s, a decade itself known as the Jazz Age. This novel represents an advance in her work. *Paradise* (1999) brings to light the conflicts existing between colour and colour, religion and religion, men and women and past and present.

When Morrison's writings are viewed from the critical perspectives which dominate the present century, one would arrive at some uncomfortable conclusions. Those include the limitations of Afro-American experience which are conditioned by the limitations of the language and the exposition of the forces of oppressions such as race, sex and class being viewed mostly from generic perspectives and the myths surrounding the construction of identities (Double Consciousness). This paper attempts to look into a few of these aspects in a perspective which is advocated by Henry Louis Gates in his popular critical work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

There can be no doubt that African American tradition of literary production is very rich and long standing. It has witnessed tremendous developments in terms of the 'insights' that it offers some of which are quite familiar whereas others are uncomfortable. The flourishing of slave narratives which started in 18th century and continued till 19th century, and the phenomenal production of the works of fiction which dominated the 19th century and the much popular Harlem Renaissance of the 20th century are the events which shaped our understanding of the critical discourse of African American Writings. But of late, the development of theory and criticism has been challenged by an uncomfortable question whether Black criticism and Black feminist criticism have quite the same agenda. Despite the strong emphasis by the critics such as Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Hazel Carby, and Bell Hooks that they both have altogether different agenda there are also some critics who seek to hold a contrary position. This conflict or divide is a very complex matter to negotiate.

Henry Louis Gates explores this conflict through his excavations. He says that the problems surrounding defining the concept of 'identity' are much more complicated than what our language is equipped with. Identity, no doubt, is an important anchor for thinking and it is important for people who feel the need for voices for a place in the literary and cultural horizons.

Interpreting 'identity' takes us to a path full of unexpected twists and turns. It is almost like quick sand wherein the popular understanding which has been established so far sinks so deep. In our exploration of race as an issue, we encounter the two major problems pertaining to the issue of 'identity'. The first one is related to our understanding of what constitutes 'our identity' in essential sense of the term (essentializing 'identity') and the second one is related to the context wherein we operate and in other words, which of the identities we are concerned with at a particular point of time (identity queue).

'The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term 'race' has been used both to describe and inscribe the differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, gene pool,

and all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, celebration, usury and fidelity' (24)

The basic question before Gates is: Is race an issue? . If race is attributed with positive values, it may be considered as 'stereotyping 'for others. He is very much aware of the landmines to be avoided while negotiating the discourse on race.

The sanction of biology contained in sexual difference does not and can never obtain when one is speaking of racial difference. Yet, we carelessly use our language in such a way as to will this sense of natural difference into our formulations. (56)

In other words, there is a difference between the sexes in biological term, but it is not necessarily true in the cases of races. So, when one speaks about women and men in feminist tradition she has to come face to face with the problem of actual difference but when one speaks about black and white in the traditions of our discourse on race she is not actually talking about genuine difference at all. Therefore the discourse with greater of integrity of the two is one which has differences which are absolutely clear and conspicuous as opposed to the one which deals with the differences of whatever one thinks of them or whatever one wants to make out of them .

Morrison's reflections on this 'identity construction' help the readers a lot to come out of the predicament of 'our recent understanding'. Her thought on this are very much shaped by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. Morrison says that 'identity' is not much the question of what something 'is' but rather a question of what it 'is not'. The absolute necessity for the construction of white identity is intricately linked to the idea of 'back as absence'. Morrison further states in her essay *Playing in the Dark* states that 'construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not- free also the projection of the not- me'. The question whether a person could become white without the availability of a black absence is predominant all through her discourse.

Michael G.Cooke who 1984 wrote a book called *African American Literature in the twentieth Century*. He argues that the history of African American literature passes essentially through four stages .It begins with self-veiling, which is a period during which a lot African-American writers attempted to write imitating white models. (Phillis Wheatley's writings bear evidences of influences from Alexander Pope).The second phase, is called 'solitude' which involves a continual and persistent use of white models, white prose styles , a way of narrating which is derived from white teachers, still this period is known for its recourse to self-definition. (Douglas' slave narrative can be quoted as an example).

The third stage is called 'kinship'. It refers to a period in which many writers consider writing as a mission. It has resulted in significant production of literature in which African Americans reach out to each other, identify themselves as a community, not as individuals struggling to be free but rather as a community. This phase is identified with experiments with dialect and a way of narrating and poetizing which involves a self-conscious insistence on verbal and linguistic difference (Toni Morrison's writings bear witness to phase). Then the last stage, which has not been reached till now is 'Intimacy'. It indicates the freedom to expropriate any and all models, not in other words to insist necessarily on one's own creative paradigms as racial tradition but to expropriate anything that comes ready to hand. This is vision of Cooke which Gate thinks that we have not yet arrived. This brings us back to the original question which we try to explore. How can we do theory and criticism in white man's language? The necessity of bending language to one's own purpose is what is emphasized in the remarkable statement of Bakhtin. He says:

...language , for the individual consciousness lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's . It becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with his own inventions , his own accent ,when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intentions. Prior to this moment of

appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it 'one's own'. (46)

Gates in this context reminds us of Derrida who said 'We must master how to speak other's languages without renouncing (our) own'. Gates calls this 'expropriation' of other people's tradition, more particularly white tradition. This process is very long and complicated and will have serious consequences on the way in which thoughts are processed and language is constructed.

Morrison, on this issue, advocates the rights of the African American to use the language in its all variety and peculiarity which reflect their existential reality. It is an expression of an identity. It is what defines an individual in primary sense and relates him to his own group and then to the larger group of Humanity. Language promotes cultural identity and culture preserves language. The reciprocal relation between culture and language can never be ignored in our reading of Morrison's writings. Afro-American dialect (AAVE) gets reflected all through her writings is itself an expression of Afro-American Identity. The pidginized variety of the dialect has penetrated into the mainstream and found its own place in the language map of America.

According to Morrison variations in language reflects 'variations' between multiple identities which define them as per their own standards much against the so-called expectations of standards. Language and structure limit and determine human knowledge and thought. The limits of an individual's language limit the individual's world as such for the subject does not belong to the world but it is the limit of the word. Hence, when her writings are viewed from linguistic and literary perspectives, a considerable amount of information emerges which underlines the fact how the enslaved Africans find their own ways and means to communicate with one another in order to share their common concerns despite the horrible circumstances which 'damage' their souls. They get connected to one another through a code language which has enough features and properties express their anguish, pain, anger, desperation and desolation. Language is the armory of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past and the weapons of its future" says Coleridge. Language variance, as many would agree, is one of features of a postcolonial text. A language is what Bill Ashcroft and his co-authors call, "a human behavior and consists in what people do rather than in theoretical models".

To sum up, African-American writings of today reflect on and recognize the existence of multiple identities and complex processes of change which limit our understandings. The rejuvenated interest in their history, the recognition of the emergence of a community of black women writing, a continual exploration of music and other forms of vernacular cultures and the influence of African American literary scholarship are some of the features which merit critical evaluation. More particularly, a re-reading or re-interpretation of what really constitutes an identity and how the sources of oppression such as race, sex and class can be viewed from social, political and economic perspectives. Although in the recent past African American society has progressed in terms of their economic conditions, much remains to be done on social and political dimensions.

Just as the whites enslaved the Blacks and put in shackles, in India the fairly well-educated and the affluent group of people are set out to oppress, in whatever way possible, the genuine uprising of the backward people. More specifically, just as African women are exploited by systems such as race and gender, Indian "dalit" women too continue to be tortured by factors such as caste and gender oppression. They experience the problem of double marginalization caused by the systems which grade people on illogical yardsticks. Like the African Americans, the Indian "dalits" - the scheduled caste, the scheduled tribe as well as other socially and economically oppressed sections of society, including women,

irrespective of their caste and economic statue - are a marginalized group. The struggle of the "dalits" in India also has to be understood in the matrix of issues such as class, caste, gender and race.

The experience of "dalits" in Indian context should not be taken in isolation. The struggles they take up and the challenges they face on their march towards freedom and liberation make them stand parallel to the suffering and struggles of African Americans. Even after the political liberation of the Blacks from the shackles of slavery, they were not able to decide their destiny. Similarly in the context of India, political freedom has failed to ensure economic and social freedoms. As a result of this failure, the lower caste people particularly the "dalits" continue to wallow in poverty. Their legitimate concerns are either ignored or manipulated in more ways than one.

There is doubletalk in India and America on social justice for the marginalized but reality is different from rhetoric. In both countries untouchability and racism are forbidden by law but only lip service is paid to the legislations prohibiting discrimination on the basis of caste or color. Hence, caste and race are even today real issues in the contemporary world influencing personal and social relations. They facilitate the maintenance of imperial domination. This imperial domination should be identified, resisted and dismantled by evolving a new and creative form of mobilization. This vision is crystallized in the following words of Fanon. He says, "Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself" (28).

This paper offers scope to the readers to look deeper further into the issues of freedom by comparing African American experience of oppression with Indian Dalit experience of social stigmatization and exclusion. The mental existences of both the oppressed communities, arguably, flow along the same channels of ideas and consciousness. Containing the same momentum and under the same cosmic inspiration, the Blacks and Dalits have set out for a tryst with the same Destiny which continues to attract serious academic discussions and debates in the days to follow.

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