

CHAPTER 1

The Concept of Identity and Its Significance in African American Literature

Identity appears to be a complex issue in literary and political discourses and it bears multidimensional interpretations of race, ethnicity, religion and politics; it occupies a significant place in all literary genres. In fact the concept of identity is imbued with varied and multifaceted connectivity, pertaining to a person's relation with the social, cultural, religious or political environment in a larger sense of belonging where one section occupies an advantageous position over another section thereby pushing the weaker section to a borderline area where they are viewed with a lens of marginality; hence the concept of identity changes from situation to situation. After all, the question of identity arises when a crisis takes place, be it an individual, a race, a nation or a religion; when a situation of hegemonic exercise takes place in the social hierarchy, a process of polarization begins to enter into the social structure thereby pushing one set of people into the sideline and another set of people occupying the hegemonic position in such a hierarchy of social construction and wants to create a legacy of their hegemony; a process of 'othering' begins to enter into the social construction.

Counting on their Race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture, a set of people consider themselves superior to others in terms of race, economy or gender, and distinguish themselves from other groups; they form an understanding about their position and take pride in who they are. However, an individual may possess more than one cultural identity as a result of geographical and social mobility, caused by social violence or natural hazard; and sometimes because of their desire for belonging to a particular social set up. Every human being in addition to having their own personal identity, has a sense of who they are in relation to the larger community—the region, the race or the nation. The Postcolonial authors are found to be using their literature to solidify through criticism and celebration, an emerging national identity which is 'new' and 'hybrid' in terms of the colonial intervention. The study or the reevaluation of representation of that entire identity eventually and essentially happens to be the result of a country's gaining independence from a colonial power, or a race getting freedom from slavery.

Identity as a subject finds its place in the field of literature in terms of 'class', 'race' and 'sex'. Everywhere we find the binaries of polarization such as rich/poor, black/white and man/woman etc. where the weaker section out of such a polarized social structure has to suffer a kind of oppression and eventually suffer the trauma of their identity crisis. It makes a quite natural and familiar picture in every society that the poor and weaker section of the society suffers a kind of inferiority complex in front of the rich and they are automatically lagged behind in the competitive ways of life. They are deprived of numerous social advantages because of their poor economic status; thus the economic differences create two distinct classes in the society—the rich and the poor—and it appears as a global phenomenon where the poor are found to be suffering identity crisis.

Racial difference always plays a significant role in creating identity crisis of a community which suffers malice and hatred in front of those traditions and conventions that give birth to a trend of hierarchy formation. The American Whites have formed such a hierarchy where the Blacks are compelled to accept their position as an inferior race. The racial experience that the African Americans have been suffering over the years has reached to such an extreme level that their stories occupy the thematic concerns of all the literary and cultural products of the race as well as in many white literary practices in America. The racial condition in America is different from the racial experiences in the former colonies like India and other nations with colonial experiences in different parts of the world; the racial incidents in such places are found in terms of caste consciousness. In America, the skin colour used to be the demarcating line for locating and exercising the racial difference between the oppressors and the oppressed. The haunting colour distinction looms so large in the black psyche that whiteness itself became a factor of traumatic situation; and it affected remarkably in the formation of black identity.

Other than racism, sexual experience is also found to be another important factor affecting black identity crisis. Morrison has narrated the African American society as a 'racialized and sexualized society', which suggests the sexual exploitation of the Black women in the social hierarchy of patriarchy or rather masculinity. It is a universal phenomenon that the female body is treated as a play thing for male sexual pleasure, and in all feminist discourses there are the depictions of the exploitation of female body in the name of male sexual hegemony. It is quite a common picture that in most of the female narratives, we see the authors endlessly talking about the sexual abuse in the hand of patriarchy. In African American literature, Toni Morrison throughout her literary discourses has tried to

assert that the Black women are doubly marginalized in a highly racialised society. In her debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows that the female body is not safe even in front of a black father; it is a story that narrates the scene of a wretched black girl being seduced by her drunkard father. It makes the picture quite evident that the black women are not only marginalized by race in the White dominant American society, they are also marginalized by sex even among the people of their own community. A society where sexual violence like rape, adultery and inter-racial sexual relations are quite commonly found, women have to suffer numerous tortures in the name of heterogeneous sexual experiences.

In the Post-colonial era the problem of identity has been featured with utmost importance in most of the famous literary creations around the world; especially in the nations where there is the imprint of the colonial rule that intentionally and ruthlessly ruined the origin cultural identities of the colonized people. The identity crisis of the postcolonial society that makes the backbone of the whole body of postcolonial literature was affected by several factors. In fact the whole body of postcolonial literature can be classified into various categories according to such factors; and some of the major issues and factors affecting the postcolonial identity have been discussed below.

In most cases the personal experiences of the postcolonial authors influence their writings. In the portrayal of the literary characters, the postcolonial writers witnessed various issues relating to their identities and reflected such issues in the depiction of the fictional characters, poetic images and other forms of literary imaginations. Writers who have got the experience of colonialism are better attuned to the intricacies of any social, political, religious or cultural issues; and they can simultaneously create and interpret an impression of belonging and identity. If the writers themselves are not tied down to any vital social issue, they obviously will fail in constructing a narrative that can influence the general perception of issues they want to focus through their narratives. Although sometimes writers may deal with their personal crisis of identities and feelings of alienation, at other points they appear to have a higher calling, becoming the mouthpieces for the confusion and aimlessness of a nation or an entire generation. Agents like war and colonial invasions bring with them not just physical destruction and monetary damage, they are also responsible for the disintegration of beliefs and value systems. These psycho-physical situations provide the post-colonial writers with ready materials for their literary discourses. Ideological chaos and a feeling of meaninglessness is usually a result of the agencies that bring forth confusions relating to their identity and position in the changing social environment. However writers channel this

confusion into their work leaving behind a documentation that not only gives an account of the facts, but presents an accurate portrayal of the emotional and mental anguish felt by the collective population of the period.

War always plays a vital role either in the existence of the transition of a race or the preservation of the cultural heritage of a nation; the war affected societies or nations get a new cultural status in the post war environment because that status in both cases is greatly affected by it. The First World War for instance, had a lasting effect in the history of mankind, leading to an existential crisis among people and causing them to denounce existing value systems and embrace nihilism in their social behaviour. While setting up the domain of public mindset in the post war environment, The World War not only affected the political scenario of the world, it also created a class of authors dealing with the themes of war fear and war impact in their literature. For instance, there is a group of authors whom Gertrude Stein called “Lost Generation”, which as a term was popularized by Earnest Hemingway, to refer to the writers who suffered a loss of all inherited virtues and values after the First World War. The phrase used by Stein to describe these writers, showcases the evil impact of the war in their works. Losing all their inherited social and individual values, these writers had an acute sense of alienation and detachment from their origin places. They sought familiarity and association with the new environment in order to come to terms with the loss of their inherited values, but it was the sense of isolation and lack of a concrete identity that ultimately shaped the personality and creative faculty of them. Writers like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, despite suffering the same alienation and isolation of the Lost Generation, gave this age such an iconic status through their literature that their identity is synonymous to the age itself. Although war is presented as a negative force affecting the identity of a number of cultural groups, it also paved way to the development of some other races. The African Americans for instance, got the advantage of the war-time situations, where the white American authorities were compelled to enroll the otherwise segregated and marginalised Blacks in their army, thereby giving them a platform for standing with the Whites.

Another influencing factor that affects the identities of different communities and nations in the world is colonial interference. If war leads to a clash of civilizations, its natural counterpart colonization can make a great change to a nation’s cultural tradition and its collective identity by interfering in its cultural inheritance. The rule of a foreign country during the colonial period, which came with the influx of new cultures, language, religions and value systems, was found directly interfering with the existing system of social

construction in terms of a society's identity and belonging. In the colonies, the elements of the invader's culture got easily confused with the existing cultural elements of the colonized natives; and it created a kind of hybrid cultural tradition in the colonized society. The sensible Writers of such societies try to translate this invasion of identities and confusion into their creative work thereby producing discourses with strong sense of affinity and an individual distinctiveness which as a whole enters into the domain of "post-colonial literature".

Cultural dislocation is another important post-colonial phenomenon that influences the identity of a great number of people in the colonized societies, such as the African American experience where they have lost the cultural inheritance living in a dislocated cultural environment. The dislocation of their cultural environment affects their cultural behaviour, and in the many cases they end up losing their own cultural heritage. The Indian Diasporas in the Caribbean islands and the Africans living in America suffered this sort of an identity crisis brought forth by their cultural dislocation. In fact the African slaves hired during the colonial periods and their descendants, having settled in America with the new identity of African Americans time and again feel the trauma of being rootless because of their cultural dislocation.

History and Identity: Literary Perspectives

Identity makes the prime concern in all forms of literature of the post-colonial period. An important feature of colonial discourse, as Homi K. Bhabha observes, is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness, which is created mostly under the light of western theoreticism. He further says that "fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition."¹ Hence colonial discourse can be said to be a stereotype of the western outlook. In the direct impact of colonialism, many races in the world lost their origin identity, because in many cases, the colonial masters after occupying the culturally and economically backward areas, tried to change their cultural tradition/cultural behaviour with a view to keeping their dominance over such people. The change that the colonized people embraced, however in most cases, was chosen by the people in their own free will rather than being imposed upon them by the colonizers. In fact the colonized people all over the world became greatly influenced by the European living standard, and they began to follow or imitate some of the habits and manners of the colonial masters. This type of

changing/imitating tendency in the colonized people is prevalent everywhere in their living style, their cultural behaviour and their process of development; Bhabha calls it a ‘Mimicry’ and refers to them as ‘mimic men’(*The Location of Culture*,p.125). Bhabha elaborates the idea, in relation to his Eurasian context of postcolonialism, by pointing out the approach of Lord Macaulay revealed in his ‘Minute on Indian Education’ of 1835, which aimed at the production of “a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect—in other words a mimic man raised through our English schools.”² The impact was so great that many people either gave up or totally forgot their own root or origin culture. This kind of treatment towards the colonized people—it does not matter whether it is a native race or an immigrant community—is common to all the European colonies across the world. The colonial experiences have imparted numerous changes in the cultural behaviour of the colonized people.

Even in the African American community, notwithstanding the exception they are holding among the colonized societies in the trauma of cultural dislocation and the resultant identity crisis, we see a similar type of imitating tendency where the Blacks are found to be trying either to adopt the white habits and manners in their living standards or getting merged with them, even though they are culturally different from the whites. In terms of the trauma of colonial experience and cultural dislocation, the African Americans stand apart, because they are the ones who had lost their cultural identity to the world a forced slavery, and now articulating the righteousness of the richness of their cultural root that was almost withered away under the burning experiences of slavery; hence, they have occupied a remarkable position in the history of mankind and human evolution as a specific group.

The whole body of Postcolonial literature including the African American literature deals with the issue of identity crisis in various contexts. The historical, cultural and ideological circumstances prevalent in the alien and native societies make the protagonists of each postcolonial literature face several questions about their identity, so as to who they are, where they have come from, of what ancestry they are born of etc. Usually these people become victims of despair and loneliness as they are confronted with such questions from the people around them. In this regard Coulmas says, “Identity is a multi-layered dynamic process rather than an inborn trait that cannot be helped. Identities are partly given and partly made” (2010, p.178). The cultural clash/mix-up of an uprooted race with the dwellers of the place of new settlement produces a hybrid genre. In the Postcolonial period, the people of all

the colonies virtually became a hybrid genre, as Robert J.C. Young points out that “a hybrid genre says something about contemporary social problems, social contradictions; and hybridity shows the connection between the racial categories of the past and the contemporary cultural discourse.” Therefore, in order to understand and embrace the idea of cultural hybridity, when attempting to explore the concept of national identity, we need to understand the importance of them in the present national context or communicate the lasting effects of the colonial process. Young reiterates that we are still locked into parts of the ideological network of a culture that we think and presume that we have surpassed. According to him the question is “Whether the old essentializing categories of cultural identity, or of race, were totally essentialized, or have been retrospectively constructed as more fixed than they were.”³

Post-colonial literature presents two types of identity crisis. On the one hand the colonized people living in either case—in their native lands or in a foreign soil—whose ethnic identity is either totally wiped out or completely changed by the adverse effect of colonialism. The other class of people includes those who were shifted by the colonizers to various European colonies in the other continents and made them settle in those places, either as slaves or indentured labourers, thereby disconnecting them from their root or origin; but these folks later became conscious of their ancestry, and began to raise their voices against the colonial intervention in their cultural development. The Caribbean and African people who were brought to different colonies in Europe and America include this type of people. Authors such as Toni Morrison, Ralf Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston etc. of America articulate the racial differences that the African Americans have been experiencing over the years; and even the African authors like Chinua Achebe or Ngugi Wa Thiongo also reflect this type of crisis in their literary works, of course in their own points of view. The literature of the period talks about the dislocation of various cultural groups during the process of colonization; and as a result, concepts like diaspora, hybridity, multiculturalism etc. began to enter into the realms of such literature.

The issue of identity is not a clear and fixed concept as it may be imagined, that led to the crisis and became a phenomenon as K. Mercer argues, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.”⁴ In the decades following the Second World War, because of the process of decolonization and liberation of the nations from colonial rule, there began to take place a noteworthy move in the direction of recreating social and

individual identities. The period is also marked by the struggle of decolonization in all levels of social life, culture, economy, arts and religion that demanded restoration of their own identity which was lost in the hands of the colonial powers. During this period, in all the colonies there developed a kind of up-rise as Edward Said points out, “nationalism-restoration of the people, declaration of identity, coming out of new cultural practices as a mobilized political power initiated and then raised the struggle against western authority in the non-European world” (Said, 1993: 218).

The meaning and concept of identity in the postcolonial context is usually linked to the "other", that is to say, they recognize themselves or their identity in relation to the existence of the "other". The concept of Otherness is a feature to recognize identity in postcolonial era which carries a twofold meanings: On the one hand it keeps one section at a privileged state by sidelining another section—the weaker section or the oppressed section—with a view to polarising the concept of identity in favour of a class of people who consider themselves to be the hegemonic group; on the other hand, the binary relation of Self/Other brought about by the colonial experience has created a kind of identity dislocation which paved way for creation of a hierarchical situation in different parts of the world. When the process of decolonization began, the colonised societies began to form a different type of national identity following the post-colonial experiences; and such a newly formed national identity seems to be very unstable and unfixed because it provokes some automatic changes in the national character of those people because of the changing socio-political and cultural environment. The situational events of migration and dislocation because of certain post-colonial phenomena like partition and transfer lead to a confusion in understanding the identity of the colonized people. Since the identity is not a stable and fixed notion as Hall confirms: “Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses” (Hall 1989, p.10); it has to be discussed in terms of the changing socio-political scenario. The impact that the colonial legacy has left over the descendants is of multiple dimensions, because the consequences of colonialism differs according to different locations and cultural environments; and such a variable impact became instrumental in giving different shapes and forms to the people over there. The impact of colonization was found to be affecting the psychological as well as the biological nature of the colonized people. Therefore, identity, as we find in case of the American Blacks, is not always colonial imposition; in most cases, it is rather chosen, and actively used, of course within particular social contexts and constraints. Against dominant representations

of "others" in postcolonial literature, there is still an inherent and persistent resistance from the colonial supremacy. In fact the colonizers intentionally affected the identities of the colonized people in order to continue their dominance over them and exercise their power to rule over them. But ironically even years after the departure of the colonial regime, the colonized people have not given up the new habits which are either imposed upon them by the colonial masters or even chosen by themselves, which have left a lasting effect upon their identity, thereby turning their identity into a hybrid shape. After all, the issue of identity became the prime concern for the narratives of all literary genres across the world in the post-colonial period.

Postcolonial novel most commonly features the issue of identity as recurrent themes, as most of the novels of the post-colonial period intend to focus the changing pictures in the colonized nations after coming into freedom. All the postcolonial novelists like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo etc. deal with the themes related to identity in the postcolonial society. Most of the literature of this period deals with the ways in which the postcolonial period's perceptions are expressed; and the day to day realities experienced by colonized people in their respective societies are used as important tools for the literary creations of the age. Because of the new perspective that the post-colonial fiction adopted, a marked shift in the thematic concern of the novels of the period was noticed. This shift resulted in an inevitable move from the previous traditional novel style and motifs to the ways of expressing issues concerning peoples, societies and individuals of the time under the direct or indirect influences of the colonial rule. There is a kind of common and special inclination in the post-colonial novel to reveal the effects that the colonial experience left on the colonized peoples. Therefore, the prime questions and issues that the postcolonial novels are most commonly found to be engaged with, are the themes of resistance, nationalism, diaspora situation and ethnicity crisis. Postcolonial novels, as a general experience, are written in the form of the counter-discourses of resistance with their own forms, styles and thematic concerns highlighting the lives of the colonized people. The changes that provoked in the colonized people under the colonial regime make a common picture in almost all the novels of the period. The postcolonial novels are also very often found to be engaged with depicting the problematic situation of immigrants which was one of the results of the colonial politics and one of the obvious aftermaths of colonial (mis)rule. The racist experiences and displacement and Diasporas are reflected in the works of many of the postcolonial novelists such as Sam Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison and a host of other

leading novelists of the period. It is a fact common to most of the postcolonial novels that it is written as a discourse which can be said to be writing back to the legacy of colonial literature and politics and that is confirmed by many theorists and critics such as Frantz Fanon, Bill Ashcroft and Salman Rushdie and others.

Postcolonial novel is marked by various common traits since most of them are created by the same urge and tendency. Among the various common features, identity, as has been already stated above, makes a common focal point in the postcolonial novel. Most of them try to depict the crisis and the conflict of the colonized people's struggle to find a way for the identification between the previous native heritage and history and the power of dominant culture that is imposed upon them by the colonizers. This idea is discussed by Edward Said in his widely read book *Culture and Imperialism* that "the national re-establishment of society, affirmation of identity, and the appearance of new cultural practices instigated as mobilized force and then advanced the struggle against Western domination everywhere in non-European world" (Said, 1993, p. 218).

Although the foremost themes of the postcolonial novels are varied and diverged according to their geographical locations, there is a marked commonality in their thematic concerns; they mainly depict the struggles of the native peoples against the difficulty to establish their own identity, despite having the flux of economy and cultural confusion in their cultural identity. So, the postcolonial novelists as a rule tend to portray the hesitant cultural and national identities of such communities that were endeavouring to construct/reconstruct their nations after being liberated from colonial rule. In many respects, the post-colonial novels tend to explore the tension of keeping equilibrium of the former colonized lives and the new immigrant lives; revealed through their struggle between their new ruling system and the new standards of living they have begotten after the colonial experience. It is a fact universally accepted that the colonial experience has affected the lives of the colonized people both in the native environment and foreign environment of the immigrants. Either way people provoked great changes in their socio-cultural lives which they cannot rectify. As for an instance, in case of the diasporic presentation, the theme of homelessness and the problems of the immigrants' experience in the places of the colonizers make a common feature of the postcolonial novel; and the writers of this type are very large in number. If the diasporas being in the new places suffer the feelings of rootlessness, the natives on the other hand suffer a kind of psychological conflict in the colonial impact; because in many cases the natives have given up their own cultural heritage while adopting

the new cultural habits formed by colonialism which Bhabha calls ‘mimicry’; and there is a sense of loss in either case.

Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author, pictures the question of identity and ethnicity of the African Ibo society in his novels, where he depicts their life, culture and history. Achebe in his novels visualizes how the community at first had great difficulty because of the lack of any well-established, centralised institutions and leaders to lead the tribe. There is no rigid hierarchy of power in the Ibo society. Achebe and a host of other African authors are now articulating the values of their ethnic culture and reiterate the need for digging out the lost cultural heritage thereby wiping out the traces of colonial intervention. These are only a few experiences; the pages of all the post-colonial novels are filled with these types of experiences concerning the issues of identity in their respective societies. Similarly, we see the iteration for restoration of the lost cultural root in the art and literature of the African American authors. If the Nigerian authors are articulating the reinstallation of the lost ethnic cultures into their home treasure, the African American authors are found to be articulating the importance of their cultural root in the formation of their ‘new’ national identity. Toni Morrison, the African American novelist, for instance, is born in a dislocated environment and is haunted by the memory of the ancestral root; and all her memory gets focused in her literature. Her novels are the fictional/historical documents of the identity crisis suffered by the African communities living in the United States. In fact the identity of the African Americans stands apart, since they bear a unique identity in the US, where they have been living like origin settlers, in many cases even from earlier times than the whites. Thus the post-colonial novel, despite having the common colonial experience, tends to become area specific and regional in the presentation of their colonial experience.

Like any other forms of literature, a number of theoretical and critical works have appeared in the post-colonial period, and they provide the readers with vital resources for the study of postcolonial literature. As an aftermath of colonialism, many nations started their struggle for independence and eventually gained freedom. Postcolonial literature began to flourish at such a condition reflecting the colonial impact upon those nations; likewise, postcolonial criticism developed on the binary of the notion of colonizer and colonized. The most common themes that literature in both cases, deal with are race, gender, ethnicity, identity and culture. Postcolonial criticism, as Habib in his *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory* argues, basically tends to “re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized” and “to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal

access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities” (Habib, 2008,p.739).

One important aspect of postcolonial theory is that other than being a product of multiculturalism and decolonization, there is a historic shift from revolutionary nationalism in the third world to the thoughts of modernized nations under the direct/indirect influence of colonialism. Notwithstanding the laudable appreciations of Eurocentrism in the critical and theoretical sphere, the post-colonial period is credited with the birth of a number of non-European theorists and critics of repute. It is noteworthy a fact that, a large number of well-known writers and theorists who came out in the second half of the 20th century were not British or American, but they were from former British colonies such as Sam Selvon, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatry Spivak, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka etc. All of these writers and critics were having first hand experience of colonialism and they reflected the issues of identity under the umbrella of postcolonial theory. The innovative theoretical ideas like Homi K. Bhabha’s “Third Space” and Ranajit Guha’s “Subaltern Theory” etc. are highly influential in postcolonial study; and they are widely used in the study of post-colonial literature. Likewise, Robert J.C. Young’s Postcolonial theories also give much impetus to the study of post-colonial literature.

Critical response to the issue of identity is also of wide range and full of variety. A number of critical theories have emerged in the post-colonial period pertaining to various socio-literary contexts. Homi K. Bhabha, for instance propounded the theory of Third Space that foregrounds the idea of ‘Space’ which is “in-between the designation of identity” and that “[...] this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains the difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (*The Location of Culture*, p.4). With the emergence of new nations and new powers, the Eurocentric hegemony in the fields of literature, culture, politics and even in the critical thoughts during the colonial regime is divulged and goes into the hands of the so called “others”. Now we can see the problems of the marginalized people through the eyes of the marginalized authors. In fact the intellectuals of the marginalized sections began to feel the lack of representation in the narratives that were mostly in the hands of the privileged sections of the society; and it made them think of writing discourses to raise different issues relating to their marginalized feelings.

Slavery: The Foundation of African American Identity

It will perhaps not be an exaggeration if we say that the genre of African American literature was by and large the result of the identity crisis of the American people of African origin given birth by the experiences of slavery and the memory of it. Right from the beginning till today all the literary discourses produced by the African Americans as a matter of fact have become self-revealing in nature, where they have tried to explore the areas mostly ignored by the mainstream American writers. Therefore, all literary creations of the African Americans can be narrated as slave narratives. As a literary genre, African American literature began to flourish on the life tales of the African slaves brought to the USA during the colonial regime, who later got settled in the American soil by wiping out the traces of their cultural root. Right from the early slave narratives like *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustava Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) till the present time, the literature of the genre has been displaying stunning historical records of the long lasting struggles of the community in the white dominant American society. The narratives of Vassa reveal that the slaves living in America had come from different regions of the African continent, and therefore they are having diverged cultural background, although in many of the white historical and literary representations they were often perceived to be people of a single race, as if they belonged to the same cultural group. Therefore, Vassa's narratives became instrumental in the revelation of a very important aspect of Black representation in literary discourses; and as racial discourses they helped to establish the idea that the cultural diversity of the slaves as well as their regional differences were mostly ignored in the American white discourses, where they had been identified only either in terms of the nature of their works or in terms of the colour of their skin. After all, the autobiography of Vassa makes a striking historical document for the African slave tradition in America and the identity crisis of the whole community during slavery.

The slave narratives at the same time became a means of protest against mistaken perceptions about the African American identity. The autobiographies and the biographical sketches, such as *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869), the biography of a run away slave who became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and helped many slaves to flee to the northern states for freedom, worked as important historical documents that record the pictures of early black cultural improvement from slavery to freedom. The most prominent figure of the African American antislavery movement, Frederick Douglass whose

autobiography (written in three parts) makes an important document for black identity crisis during slavery; it worked as a black cultural discourse on racial polarization, which made President Abraham Lincoln decide upon the long lasting demand for enlisting the Blacks in the Union Army, which worked as a great factor for minimizing the racial discrimination in the nation and also in minimizing the socio-economic difference. Thus the stories narrated in his autobiography helped boosting the development process of the African Americans. Madame Keckley, whose autobiographical account *Behind the Scenes* (1868) answers to some vital questions about black identity, worked out to be the champion of black racism. So the early African American authors like Madame Keckley were not mere authors, they were sufferers as well as rebellions against such racial suffering in the nation. Another prominent early African American book revealing some important aspects of the race's marginalised identity is the autobiography of Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1901). Realizing the importance of education for uplift of a race, Washington organized the first night school for Black and Native American students. This autobiographical narrative of Washington advocated for the development of practical and technical skills that the American society essentially needed, especially among the coloured people; nevertheless, he had to confront bitter criticism from many African American opponents for his loyalty to whites. It is noteworthy a fact that other than his literary contribution, Booker T. Washington is remembered more specifically for his reformative ideas and multiple social works, which became instrumental in the transformation of black identity. W. E. B. Du Bois, the advocate of the democratic rites of the black people in America, in his writings, recorded his racial experiences and some of the vital issues of racism in his milestone work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) with the motif of racial sensitization. In his reference to the African American racial sentiment, Du Bois talks about the notion of double consciousness—pride in African heritage and pride in American citizenship—which according to him was better than a divided self. He was of the opinion that there was no need for the African Americans to seek assimilation in the so far recognized American society at the cost of their African heritage; and he insisted on keeping the African root alive while demanding equal status for the Blacks in the American society. One important contribution of Du Bois is the active rememory and assertion of the African inheritance that the American Blacks should make use for establishing their distinctive American identity.

Even after the Civil War, biographical narratives remained a popular genre among African American writers; these narratives integrate the art of storytelling and history telling

and allow the authors to address the theme of racial discrimination within personalized contexts of economic and social challenges. Some African American writers tried to collaborate with others while writing biographical narratives. As for example *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), written in collaboration with Alex Haley, captures America's cultural landscape of the 1950's and 1960's, while highlighting the turning points in Malcolm X's life. Sharing the criminal activities and prison experiences of the author, the autobiography of Malcolm X works as another important narrative for revealing the socio-religious aspects of black identity.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s brought about a dramatic upsurge in the creative practices of the American Blacks in literature, music and art that helped the race towards an overwhelming progress in every field. It not only reveals the noticeable uplift of the African Americans, it also plays a vital role towards the exposure of the developing African American identity. Among the landmark achievements of the Renaissance in the literary field was "The New Negro" edited by Alain Locke. It was a tremendous anthology where he showcased the race's emerging talents such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston in fiction and Claude McKay and Langston Hughes in poetry. The poetry of Langston Hughes reveals some important aspects of black identity, especially the hopes raised by the Renaissance and the tremendous progress the community achieved after it; but at the same time scepticism about the African Americans' dream for equal status.

In the contemporary African American literature, we see the gradual progress of the race towards achieving today's position. Now African American literature is no longer subsided as a mere racial literature; it has achieved the position of a dignified branch of American literature, just as the people of the race have developed immensely to achieve the present status where they have got the courage to walk with the whites, and in certain cases even ahead of them. The novelists of the genre today have displayed universality in many fields in their literature, despite having colour prejudices in them; and now they have stood among the frontline leading authors of the world.

African American Literature: Iteration of Racial Ancestry

In an essay of the title "Who Can Write As Other?" by the New Zealand author C. K. Stead brings forth certain important questions regarding the literary practices of the historically oppressed classes. In the essay Stead raises two very important questions about

literature of the marginalized, “First, how do we determine minority group membership? Second, can majority group members speak as minority members, whites as people of colour, men as women, intellectuals as working people? If so, how do we distinguish biased and oppressive tracts, exploitative populations, stereotyping romanticizations, sympathetic identifications and resistant, transformative visions?” (Ashcroft et al p.169). These questions brought by Stead can also be applied to the development of the identity consciousness of the African Americans which came into existence against white stereotyping. It is quite common a fact that the literary representations about an oppressed or a minority group made by the people of the advantageous class always tend to be stereotyped and romanticized by biased imagination and deliberate polarization in their approaches to the oppressed section. Hence there is a chance of misrepresentation in such literature, which creates egotistic consciousness in the oppressed class. It is memory that helps the oppressed people reiterate the rights of equality and self-improvement for the people of their community.

Under such type of a stereotyped presentation or rather misrepresentation of black life in the white discourses enhances black identity consciousness for producing black counter discourses in the United States. In order to come out of the grip of white stereotyping in literary narratives or even historical documentations, the African Americans have now felt the urge for re-iterating the value of the ancestral cultural root which they have forgotten over the years. The genre that African American writers used for revealing the identity of their race is poetry which paved the way to write fiction expressing several issues of their identity in America. The legacy of folk literature that they inherited from their ancestry kept haunting their memory, which enabled them to connect with their cultural origins despite their harsh experiences in America. The folk literature that they had inherited and had been carrying so intently in their memories became a vehicle for blending the reality of their experiences in America with their memory of the African past. The whole genre has a kind of fusion of the memory and experience that produces a kind of regional and racial literature. The materials for the literature were preserved in the hearts and minds of the whole race, though it took much time to come out in the form of literature; and all these types of coloured literature virtually become the history of all sorts of oppressions that the race is suffering. There is, however, a recurrent tendency in the majority of the advantageous group to keep the oppressed as oppressed so that they cannot come out of the grip of oppression and there is a delay in the process of their development. It is a fact worth mentioning that the delay in the

social development of the race leads towards delay in the development of their literature and culture.

The history of the African Americans is thronged with the deprivations the community had been experiencing over the ages. The African slaves living in America and elsewhere were deprived of any formal education and any intellectual activity only because of a hateful tradition of creating an inferiority condition based on their skin colour and their labouring capacity, especially during the time of slavery. The way the Blacks were treated by the white masters, it is felt as if the white slave owners thought the slaves to be unqualified for learning and other intellectual activities, as if they were born only for working and serving their masters. This way the white masters enjoyed a kind of hegemony in the social hierarchy to keep the slaves under their power thereby denying them any civil right. Very few of the slaves had the opportunity to read and write; and the few had got the occasion to learn, were confined only to the interpretation of the Bible and reading Biblical literature. Hence the few literate people that the community had produced took up their pens in a self-revealing manner to explore the emotions and conditions of the whole community. This deprivation of literacy and the exposure literary practices, is the prime cause of the delay in the development process of the community; and the Blacks are historically exploited as an inferior race. The history of racism in America virtually becomes the history of deliberate and intended social process of keeping the Blacks underdeveloped.

It is the question of identity that people of African descent living in the United States and some European nations continue to face from the days of slavery. Because of the dislocation from their place of origin, many of the black skinned people still do not know who they truly are or who their ancestors were. This was largely because of the deliberate colonial intervention in the black perception of their cultural identity. The slave masters stripped off the Africans living in America their names, their languages, their culture and customs, and their history, so that they could keep the Blacks fully under their control. Generations of African people living in the American land were made to think of Africa as the "Dark Continent" filled with savages and cannibals, in fact they were deliberately made to believe so by the stereotyped white discourses. There were even efforts to make the people of African descent believe that the Africans were actually benefited by the fate of being taken away from their African homeland; and such a view was accepted by some of the Africans. Jacobus Capitein for instance, who was born in Ghana, felt that it was the will of God that made him a slave so that he could be brought to the "blessed" land of Holland. He, like some

other people of his race, later became a defender of slavery. Today most people of African descent, however, would agree that slavery was no blessing to their ancestors. Another tendency found among some of the black people is the rejection of African identity. Herman Cain for example, insisted that he was a "Black American" not an African American. It is a serious matter that people of African descent began to think of themselves in such a way, the way that could wipe out the traces of their cultural root. Scholars have found out various reasons behind such tendencies growing in the community.

It is important to note that the migration of the African people to America did not happen willingly. They were brought to America forcibly as plantation labourers, industrial workers or household servants during the colonial regime. Unlike most other ethnic groups that came to the United States, they did not leave Africa in search of a better life or in search of a new standard of living. Coming to America, they had rather lost a better standard of living that they had in their own home land. In fact many African Americans, in most cases, were either ignorant of or disinterested in their rich cultural heritage and developed an idea of having descended from an uncivilized alienated land. Even today there is a tendency to view Africa as a "Dark Continent" which is filled with misery, poverty, and starvation, although there is hardly any truth in such negative perception of Africa. Later when they realized their rich inheritance, longing for their cultural root began to throb in the hearts of the African descendants; the urge for such longing became so strong that some of the slaves even committed suicide in hopes that their spirits would return to Africa. This type of Africanist tendency makes the narrative devised as the myth of flight as we find in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

On the other hand, the Africans have the richest and most diverse background than any other ethnic groups in America. Most African people were given a notion that they had nothing but slavery in their history and many of them trace the origins of their history to slavery, when slavery was actually a disruption of their history. When an African American, such as Herman Cain or Whoopie Goldberg for example, rejects the term "African" they are in effect rejecting thousands of years of African history and reducing their historical understanding of their own identity to 200 years of slavery in America, by forgetting the rich cultural heritage which had been wiped off by the colonial intervention. Morrison reflects such tendency of the African Americans in her novel *Paradise* where Patricia Best shows her disinterestedness towards her African cultural root.

The Africans living in America and other European colonies, who were otherwise thought to be an inferior race, having no self-respect not even having any civilized identity other than a 'Black Negro' finally got a global identity in the post-colonial period; and they have got connected to a global community, because the people of African descent are connected by a common history and a common experience of colonial oppression. If the Jamaican, Guyanese, Trinidadian, Ghanaian, Nigerian, or Kenyan people felt the sting of British colonialism, the Haitians, Martiniquans, Senegalese, and Guineans have felt the sting of French colonialism. Similarly, Brazilians, Angolans, and Mozambicans have all suffered through Portuguese colonialism. Among all these black skinned groups, the Africans living in America experienced racial discrimination in a different way, and they have responded to racism and colonialism differently than the other marginalized groups. After all the whole race of the people of African descent living in America and elsewhere in any of the European colonies are the victims of colonial oppression and racial hatred, and the cases of the African Americans fall apart.

It has already been stated that many African people living in the United States and even in some other nations do not prefer the African tag on their identity. It is primarily because of the ideas and values imparted to them through the colonial education system, which they have been adopting as gospel teachings provided by the colonial masters. They have been taught in the White sponsored schools much about European civilizations such as Greece, Rome, France, and Britain, giving them little chance to learn about their own cultural root. On the one hand, the Euro centric education system is geared mostly towards European history and culture; and the stereotyped media depictions of Africa, on the other hand, are mostly negative and misinformed. Under such circumstances, many people of African descent obviously began to develop negative perceptions about their ancestral cultural roots, and consequently they were losing interest in their original identity.

With the growing consciousness about the cultural and historical root, many of the Africans living in America still struggle with what they perceive to be conflicting national and ethnic identities. In the process of establishing their historical root, their experiences create a different psychological state what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as a "double consciousness." Despite living in the American soil for centuries even forgetting their past, they are facing acute racial discrimination and being treated as second-class citizens. Now they are not at all Africans, and the treatment meted out to them has also taught the African Americans that they are not fully American either. In fact, the African Americans until the

very recent time were found to be struggling to be accepted by the American mainstream. The movements such as “Black Lives Matter” show that this fight for acceptance and recognition in the nation is still going on. The renowned actor and social activist Paul Robeson perhaps said it best when he announced, “I am an American who is infinitely proud to be of African descent.”

Du Bois’s observation that the twentieth century would be the ‘century of the colourline’, proved to be correct as the coloured population of America began to expose their identity in different ways. Since the ethnic identities of the African Americans are differentially perceived throughout history, it is a growing tendency of the African American writers throughout the ages to revisit and reinterpret the identity politics through their writings. In all the texts of black literature including the slave narratives, personal histories, and spiritual or secular autobiographical texts, there is the author’s inherent interest in the interpretation of the identity politics. The discourses in the narratives of the black authors make us fully acquainted with the conditions of slavery and the despair of the coloured people associated historically with the political, social, and economic environment surrounding the African American backwardness; they also reveal to us the factors creating obstacles to the attainment of their spiritual as well as physical freedom. Although they are the autobiographical accounts of the authors narrating their personal experiences, they focus the socio-political status of their race. We see such revelation of the African American identity throughout the whole genre from Frederick Douglass’s narrative (1845) to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), and from Langston Hughes’s *Big Sea* (1940) to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). The whole body of the genre’s literature, especially in the autobiographies, we find a first hand or personal account of slave experiences and a thorough insight into the length and breadth of the identity politics which culminates into what Du Bois calls the ‘colour line’ of American historiography. Most of the authors articulate the African American identity crisis in their works treading on the African American history recreated through the active rememory of their African cultural heritage, but still the matter of their identity has not revealed all aspects of it to answer the queries the curious readers and scholars. The works of Du Bois, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and many other authors of colour assert the cultural relevance of the historical, social, economic, and political dimensions of African-American identity crisis.

Race and Sexuality: Black Women's Identity Crisis

The discourses of gender, class and race are always filled with complicated forms of women resistance against physical exploitation found everywhere. According to Gillian Whitlock female body “has always been crucial to the reproduction of Empire, and deeply marked by it. On the other hand it can also be at the bosom of de-scribing Empire” (Ashcroft et. al, p. 306). Whitlock’s observation can be best applied to the cultural situation narrated in the literature produced by most of the African American authors; as we have observed that the black women during the days of slavery were treated only as the reproductive machines for producing more and more slaves for the white masters.

The slave narratives make very important documents for the study of the African American community living in the American soil and elsewhere; and in these narratives we get a picture of how the Blacks had been treated in America since the days of slavery. Slavery is not only a curse for the coloured people in America that made them work for the Whites without having any recognition or credit for their work; it rather deprived them of the very basic human rights of freedom. The tradition of slavery turned even more inhuman towards the coloured women, since they were doubly exploited as victims of slavery, in being priceless labourer and unrewarded sex workers for the white masters. In the discourses of black literature, right from the Slave narratives, there are the distressful and hateful complaints about a forceful slavery bestowed upon the black Americans. Living in the new soil for generations, the slaves gradually began to feel alienated; and the African American narratives reveal the sense of their alienation and suffering. It has already been stated that the history of the African Americans virtually becomes the history of racism in America; on the other hand sexuality turns out to be a very crucial matter of social exploitation so far as the coloured women in America is concerned, because the black women are doubly marginalized. Firstly, they are marginalized by race as the women belonging to a minority race, the race treated as inferior and savage. Secondly, they are marginalized by gender and they have to suffer the pangs of discrimination from even the men of their race, where they are sexually exploited.

In the close proximity to the American Slave Narrative, Whitlock refers to a Bermuda story in a British slave narrative *The History of Mary Prince* that narrates the plight of a woman born into slavery in the Crown colony of Bermuda in 1788. The autobiographical history of Prince narrates that “she was sold as an infant, sold again in 1805 as an adolescent,

and again as a woman in her twenties. Each time the history records experiences of degradation and brutality which reach a nadir on the salt ponds of Turks Island. She was sold for a fourth and a final time to a merchant in Antigua, who took her to England with his family in 1828 to do their laundry” (Whitlock 2000, Ashcroft et. al, p.306). In the Bermuda tale we see the treatment the slave women get under slavery and the way their body is used for the purpose of serving the Whites as like as the American slaves we have seen in the African American slave narratives. Whitlock observes that “the character of the History is shaped generically in the propagandist form of a British slave narrative, which in 1830 prescribed a particularly limited sense of the intersections between gender and race in the life history of slave women” (306). This type of stereotyping in the literary discourses is common to all forms of literature representing an oppressed society. Regarding the History of the Bermuda slave, Whitlock again says that the established social and political paradigm of literary representation constrains a slave like Prince her ability to narrate her experiences with delicate realism. What is remarkable about the shape of Prince’s History, as Whitlock remarks that it attributes to her personhood, and spiritual equality. Under such stereotypical representation, there are certain absence of reality, as in the History of Prince, all traces of her sexuality and likely sexual abuse remained unfocused, because the History reveals to us little details about her married life and the bodily exploitations she had to suffer.

With the rise of female voice in the African American community, we come to know more and more about the issues of sexuality within the African American social environment. It is quite remorseful a fact that the women have to submit even their body to the white masters while in slavery. Even in freedom, the black women cannot be assured of their liberty in terms of sexuality, as they have to fall prey to the carnal desire of the male sex; and patriarchy appears to be dominant force for them even within the people of their race. We have seen the instances of black girls and women being raped and molested even by the men of their own race and by the people of close relation in the pages of many novels of the genre of coloured literature.

Hybridity in African American Identity: Racial Purity and Racial Mixture

Hybridity occupies an important place in the whole body of African American literature, since the race has adopted numerous white characters in their socio cultural behaviour because of the close connection with the white society. However, despite the resistance against the increasing racial mixture that the white supremacists have been trying,

the mixture of black and white has been increasing both biologically and culturally. The conservative black reformists were trying to keep the black cultural heritage unaffected, and thereafter began to articulate their voice seeking continuous development and greater importance of the Blacks in the American society. This type of a black identity consciousness was found in the black approaches towards American nationalism. It was Frederick Douglass who proclaimed that the 20th century would be the age of the colour line, indicating that the people with the coloured identities would get recognition and dignity in this age. The correctness of the term 'colour line' and its existence, even after the times of slavery, is proven by the release of anti-miscegenation laws in the nation. In fact these laws were passed because miscegenation was believed to be the main source of the gradual blurring of visible physical distinctions by which they had been losing the racial hegemony, because of the birth of the people of mixed colour such as the mulattoes and the increasing number of the progenies of the miscegenation.

In view of the existence of a colour line, it can be said that the whole body of the racialised American population can be separated by a distinguishing line on the basis of the binary relation of black and white. In fact the existence of such a separating line was required for continuation of a white supremacy in the country, and that is why the Whites tried to prevent the practices of miscegenation. In fact if there was any 'colour line', it was created by the white supremacists, so that they could continue their racial hegemony on the basis of such a demarcating line. If the demarcating identity markers like the 'colour line' talks about the urge for a 'racial purity' from both ends, there are certain other forms of identity markers which reveal the condition of hybridity in the African American community.

Numerous terms used in African American literature to refer to the people of mixed blood showcase the existence of hybridity in the identities of the American Blacks. One such term in the fictional representation of the Blacks is 'Passing', which narrates the condition of being hybrid. The existence of the element of 'Passing' is said to coexist with the cultivation of Miscegenation⁵ almost from the beginning. The novels with the representation of the American social difference on the basis of one's skin colour, especially in the fictions of the 1880s, were marked as the novels of passing. During this period the notion of Jim Crow⁶ prevailed in the air by which the black skinned population was segregated; and there was perpetual efforts to continue white supremacy even by rectifying the legal system for continuation of slavery and by reinforcing segregationist tendencies in American society. In fact the concepts like this had been kept alive with a view to keeping up the white supremacy

over the Blacks by suppressing them and it prevailed for more than half a century, until the time of the Civil Rights Movements. According to Gavins, “In the North, where the slave emancipation occurred ca. 1777-1846, blacks were separated by custom in churches, housing, jobs, schools, street cars, and endured racist violence” (Gavins, p.249). Such types of racial sentiments loom large in the mindset of the African American authors even today, and the events of racial mixture such as passing still make a thematic concern in contemporary African American literature.

Another form of hybridity that occupies an important place in the hall of American identity, used to identify some of the coloured folks in America is ‘Mulatto’. Webster Dictionary defines a Mulatto as “being the first generation offspring of a pure negro and a white.” Scholars and social scientists may vary in defining the mulatto identity, but one thing is common in their notion that mulattoes are the productions of racial mixture between the Blacks and Whites, recognized or unrecognized. Since there is a white mixture in the blackness of the Mulattoes, they have the rightful claim of calling them white, although they are never recognized and accepted in the white ruled social construction. On the identity of the mulattoes, therefore, a kind of undeclared tendency was found among the Blacks to pass towards the dignity of White on the basis of the white blood they bore in their veins; thus leading them towards the rightful claim of a hegemonic status in the social hierarchy. After all, they enter the realm of a hybrid generation of the African American cultural group, who are neither black nor white in the true sense; hence their identity can be described in terms of Bhabha’s ‘in-between’ space of cultural hybridity. Morrison narrates the mulatto in the character of Golden Gray in her novel *Jazz*, where the hybrid mixed-coloured boy is found searching for his identity and cultural position.

With the rise of the population of the mulattoes and their strong hold growing day by day, the white supremacists began to worry about the black up-rise that might hinder the way of exercising their hegemonic status, the White supremacy over the Blacks. In fact the system of the class difference on the basis of blood and colour is over and above socially constructed in order to keep up the white supremacy in the American social structure. The mulattoes, however criticized and negatively interpreted in a white dominated society, is said to be or rather accepted as one of the motives leading to miscegenation and, finally, the act of passing for white. The mulattoes are supposed to be superior to the pure blacks on the matter of education and other agencies of development. If mulatto is the first mixed product of the black society that is produced with the white, miscegenation is the next type of mixed product

of the black society where there is the mixture between a pure black and a mulatto or the union of two mulattoes. It shows that the American jurisdiction tried to prevent the mix up between the Blacks and the Whites and the colour sensitivity was found in the American society since the time of slavery and still there is legal provision of social division based on colour. There has been uproar and persistent campaign against miscegenation in American media as well as American literature; even anti-miscegenation laws were applied to prevent further racial mixture from the end of the Civil War to *Loving v. Virginia*⁷.

The division of the American society on the basis of colour into just two simple classes (Blacks and Whites) seems to be an attempt to continue the White dominance over the Blacks. Therefore, the increase of the hybrid generations like Mulattoes, Miscegenation or the Passing is always sought to be restricted. Thus it is found that in the American society which is broadly divided into two on the basis of the binary of black/white, there are also the people of mixed blood, who belong to neither of the two pure racial categories, though they are mostly treated as 'black' at least by the white supremacists. Hence a division made on the basis of skin colour as mere 'black' and 'white' is not all inclusive; and we have to take into account the people of the mixed blood who fall into neither category; and we have to locate an intermediate space of understanding in terms of their cultural identity. In fact there has been consistent effort in sidelining the African American writers and artists to a borderline area where they are treated as the national "Other"; because they are inferior, and therefore not given a respectable seat in the bulk of American literature. Recognition of the identity of a race depends much on the representation of it in the literature and culture of the nation. Despite centuries of persistent efforts of the African American writers and artists, they have not been able to achieve an estimable position in the American society.

In the recent approaches to the reading of African American literature, Morrison has found some uncanny arguments, which according to her are not arguments, but attitudes, that have since the seventeenth century silenced the autonomy of that literature. Morrison points out that there have been certain deliberate charges⁸ against this genre of literature, and she has defied these charges promptly from her own point of view. As for the first charge that "there is no Afro-American art", Morrison states that "contemporary critical analysis of the literature and the recent surge of reprints and rediscoveries have buried this charge and the traditional canon is forced to include the classic Afro-American works in the strategies for reading and thinking about these texts" (*Mouth Full of Blood*, p.170). As for the second charge that "Afro-American art exists, but is inferior", Morrison asserts that close reading

and careful research into the culture out of which this art is born have shown that it can no more be regarded as imitative, excessive, sensational, mimetic, and unintellectual, they are rather very often found to be “moving”, “passionate”, “naturalistic”, “realistic” or sociologically “revealing” (170). The third charge that “Afro-American art exists, but is superior only when it measures up to the ‘universal’ criteria of Western art,” according to Morrison, is “the most seductive form of analysis for both writer and critic, because comparisons are major forms of knowledge and flattery” (171). And finally regarding the fourth charge that “when Afro-American art is worthy, it is because it is “raw” and “rich”, like “ore” and like ore needs “refining by Western intelligences”, Morrison maintains that “finding or imposing Western influence on Afro-American literature has value, but when its sole purpose is to place value only where that influence is located, it is pernicious” (171). This type of attitudes of the so called mainstream critics and scholars towards the African American literary art reveals the perpetual effort of the American mainstream and the Western intellectuals for keeping the dominance over the racial “Others”.

The Third Space and African American Identity

The hybridity condition in the cultural identity of the African Americans being the prime issues in the novels of Toni Morrison, Bhabha’s theory of the Third Space becomes instrumental in the study of African American cultural identity. Since his theory talks about the enunciation of cultural difference, and since the African American community mostly suffers the cultural difference that leads them towards all sorts of social and political deprivations, we can locate the cultural position of the racialised society presented in the fictional works of Morrison in the light of the concept of Bhabha’s Third Space. In fact they have suffered a crisis of their identity in the United States, as they are being treated as the ‘Other’ by the white folks who consider themselves superior to have the rightful claim as the mainstream Americans, thereby pushing the Blacks to the sidelines. Being uprooted from their African identity, they have not achieved a respectful identity in America, for which they have virtually sacrificed their origin identity. In that type of a political turmoil, they cannot be described in terms of the polarities of Black or White. Living in the American soil for ages and for several generations, these people are getting uprooted from their place of origin, thereby losing their own cultural heritage; and in the new land they have formed a new identity, which is neither American nor African pure. Besides, there are also the people of mixed blood such as the Mulattoes, the Miscegenation etc. who are physically or

psychologically neither Black nor White. Many of such African Americans have a tendency to call themselves white, thereby dreaming of obtaining a higher position in the social hierarchy. Even the people of pure black skin after living in the white cultural environment for generations and adopting the white cultural habits, have turned out to be a hybrid cultural group who are black in colour but white in their cultural habits. Under such a complex socio-cultural environment, it becomes very difficult to narrate the hybrid cultural identity of such a race, especially in literary representation. They are beyond the identity concept of what we call a 'pure race'; since they are haunted by the constant memory of their root, they cannot wipe out their origin culture in order to earn the new identity they are looking for. They cannot claim themselves to be white in culture, in politics, or even in their mental set up; though critics like Frantz Fanon say that "The Negro is not any more than the white man."⁹ Regarding the cultural difference of the oppressor/oppressed political situation, Robert Young says that "there is an historical stemma between the cultural concepts of our own day and those of the past from which we tend to assume that we have distanced ourselves."¹⁰ Bhabha says that "Fanon is the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth"; for he speaks most effectively from the area of "ambivalence between race and sexuality; out of an unresolved contradiction between culture and class; from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality."¹¹ In such an observation Fanon takes into account the familiar alignment of colonial subjects, like Black/ White, Self/ Other etc. saying that such an alignment is disturbed and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed because of the trauma of identity crisis in the postcolonial era. To talk about the transformations of truth and value, because of colonial dislocation, Fanon demonstrates the sexual identity of the colonized folks. When he says "Our women are at the mercy of Negroes", he reveals the insatiable fear and desire of the black people. Bhabha says that "the analysis of colonial depersonalization made by Fanon in the statement not only alienates the Enlightenment idea of man, but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge" (Bhabha, 1994, p.59). In the opinion of Fanon, for whom the "black soul is a white man's artifact", the socio-cultural position of the African Americans or any Black population is neither the colonialist 'Self' or the colonized 'Other', but a disturbing distance in-between any two polar oppositions that constitute the figures of colonial 'Otherness'. Finally, Bhabha observes that the question of identity is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, as the Blacks are always given to assume, nor even a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Milkman Dead, dreams of in Morrison's novel *The Song of Solomon*. It is, as Bhabha points out, always the production of an image of identity and transformation of the subject in

assuming that image, as Pecola Breedlove aspires in the debut novel of Morrison *The Bluest Eye*.

The identity of this folk has to be described in terms of an intervening space of location, what Bhabha calls an ‘in-between space’ of enunciation. They are beyond the colonial identity markers such as the terminological polarities of Black/White or Self/Other. People of this race always face a crisis in locating their identity and their identity crisis has to be looked in a different perspective. They find it problematic to explain their identity; and that type of a question of their identity makes a prime concern in the fiction of Toni Morrison and other authors of the African American literary genre. Thus it can be stated that the Third Space theory of Homi K Bhabha bears great relevance and significance in the study of Toni Morrison’s novels where the novelist has depicted the dislocated cultural identities of the African American community.

The applicability of Bhabha’s Third Space in the interpretation of the novels of Morrison as cultural texts, can be justified with the words of the critic himself where he refers to the cultural observance of Fanon to explain the condition of black/white conflict in the identity issues of literature:

“It is the opposition of the ontology of that white world- to its assumed hierarchical forms of rationality and universality—that Fanon turns in a performance that is iterative and interrogative—a repetition that is initiatory, instating a differential history that will not return to the power of the same. Between you and us Fanon opens up an enunciative space that does not simply contradict the metaphysical ideas progress or racism or rationality; he distantiates them by ‘repeating’ these ideas, makes them uncanny by displacing them in a number of culturally contradiction and discursively estranged location” (*The Location of Culture*, pp. 339-40).

By this type of an observation Bhabha’s theory helps us negate the stereotyping white assumption that “the Black man must be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man”; it asserts the white supremacy in their approaches to blackness. Thus the theory of Third Space provides us with a formidable way of analysing cultural text of African American literature, especially the novels of Morrison in the perspective of African American cultural hybridity.

Toni Morrison and African-American Identity

In all of her creative novels, Morrison deals with the themes of racial repression, gender discrimination and cultural backwardness of the African American communities. The quest for identity of the black American people makes a recurrent theme in almost all her fictional creations. In fact her intuitive understanding of the country's political climate helped her craft a body of work that addresses the violent injustices committed against black identity in America, emphasizing a cultural awareness and celebration of the ethnic diversity. Her Mid-West town in Ohio was home to many Southern migrants, like her parents, as well as European immigrants. Her awareness of culture outside of the American white patriarchal norm greatly inspired to create lively characters for her creative fictions. Raised on the folktales and rich oral tradition of storytelling, Morrison learned the history of her community and her people through stories. Right from the beginning Toni Morrison has been creating novels dealing with the themes of racial exploitations in the American soil. Her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* deals with the psychological effect of racism upon the coloured people and narrates the story of Pecola Breedlove who seeks for the bluest eye in order to achieve of a white standard of beauty. *Beloved* is a fictional recreation of the true life events of a female slave in the late 19th century. Sethe, the main character, manages to escape slavery by fleeing from a Kentucky plantation. But she is soon forced by her dire circumstances to make a heartbreaking decision of infanticide and must sacrifice the life of her young daughter, called 'Beloved', in the fear of allowing her child to be recaptured and enslaved. Sethe is then forced to return home only to be haunted by the ghost of her baby. Morrison's *Beloved* scrutinizes the horrific effects of slavery on the identity of the African Americans. The novel presents Sethe's personal and narrative history fused with the historical context of slavery in the American South in a brilliant cultural and political commentary. Together with her two other novels—*Jazz* and *Paradise*—Morrison writes a trilogy of slave identity where she depicts the state of slavery and their troublesome lives even after coming into freedom; everywhere Morrison uses the coloured folk's memory of their origin identity or their cultural root. Her other novels like *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *A Mercy* also deal with the themes relating to slavery and state of identity in the larger ambit of the African American community. The same can be said of Toni Morrison's novel *Home* which tells the story of Frank Money, a veteran of the Korean War who faces racism upon his return to America. In the novel, there is a combination of history and myth, which is exploited by the novelist in order to interrogate the shifting contours of African American experience. Mixing memory

and myth with the present experiences, Morrison exposes the hypocrisy of the 20th century American society.

Commenting on the beginning of the novel *Beloved*, “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom.”, Morrison points out that “with numerals rather than spelled out numbers, it was her intention to give the house an identity separate from the street or even the city; to name it the way ‘Sweet Home’ was named; the way plantations were named, but not with nouns or “proper” names—with numbers instead because numbers have no adjectives, no posture of coziness or grandeur or the haughty yearning of arrivistes and estate builders for the parallel beautifications of the nation they left behind, laying claim to instant history and legend” (Black Matters, *Mouth Full of Blood*, p. 194). Morrison makes it clear for the reader that 124 refers to a house; and in most of the early drafts for the novel, the sentence following the opening line, “The women in the house knew it” was simply “The women knew it”, which hints at the event of the house being spiteful. She says that the psychological state of the residents of the house is revealed by the way their minds are haunted by the ghostly presence around the house; and this condition reveals the trauma in which they were living. According to Morrison, “the presence of the haunting is both a major incumbent of the narrative and sleight of hand” (195). If *Beloved* narrates the plight of the American Blacks under the grip of slavery, *Jazz* narrates the way of Black Freedom which came to them mostly by means of the Great Migration, where the Blacks began to move towards the northern cities in search of a modern standard of living. In *Paradise* on the other hand Morrison talks about a free black society and brings back the memory of the historical events of Desegregation.

Most of Morrison’s novels reveal the psyche of the characters plagued by nostalgia about their past and the state of affairs leading to their present lives. Throughout her novels, Morrison revisits the past by means of nostalgic recollection, and at the same time explores some of the destructive tendencies in the United States, found especially in the African American community, such as racism and bigotry. Morrison’s novels are the warehouse of the exploration of memory and consciousness, and it seems to be a tightly constructed framework in which the whole of her fiction exists. There is a fantastic deliberation of human relations depicted throughout the pages of her novels. While depicting the relationships between her characters, Morrison presents before us the cultural and political history of the United States, specifically while addressing racial segregation and the brutally inhumane prejudices inflicted on the African Americans. Morrison’s fusion of myth, history and fiction

results in a vibrant collection of prose fiction that draws serious attention as well as attraction of the readers outside her community. They have become gospel texts to create sensible response among her people to do something for ensuring a status of recognition to their identity. After all, in all the novels of Morrison, there is the picture of the African American community and their identity crisis, where the writer shows her commitment to her race while making her exercise to reveal universality in her literary creations.

Notes:

1. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.94
2. Cited by Bhabha in *Location of Culture*, p. 125
3. Robert J.C.Young, “The Cultural Politics of Hybridity”, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, See. Ashcroft et al. p 159
4. Kobena Mercer, “Welcome to theJungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics” in J. Rutherford ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990:43
5. Derived from genus and miscere, Latin for race and mix, miscegenation historically evoked white fear.Democrates, charging Republicans with “the sexual mixing of races, particularly of whites and blacks,” perpetrated anti-miscegenation laws in most of the southern states.Gavins, Raymond. *The Cambridge Guide to African American History*, p.191
6. Jim Crow or Segregation was a system to enforce white-black, racial ethnic separation and white supremacy. Deep rooted in customs and laws to control slaves and freed blacks, it interfaced slavery, evolved after slavery’s abolition, and was legal until 1964. Gavins, Raymond. *The Cambridge Guide to African American History*, p.249
7. Virginia citizens Richard Loving (white) and Mildred Jeter (black) married in Washington DC in 1958. Since the interracial marriage had been prohibited by the state since the end of the Civil War that endured during Jim Crow, the couple was arrested by the authorities and imprisoned in 1967 for violating the Racial Integrity Act (1924). Gavins, Raymond. *The Cambridge Guide to African American History*, p.174
8. See Toni Morrison, “Black Matters”, *Mouth Full of Blood*, pp. 170-71
9. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; See also Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity” *The Location of Culture* p.57

10. Robert Young, "The Cultural Politics of Hybridity" from *Colonial Desire*, in Ashcroft et al. (eds) p.158
11. See Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, See also Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity" in *Location of Culture* p.57

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