

Identities and Aesthetic Representations in the Black Diaspora Literature

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Abstract

The representation of black identity in African American literature is a subject of great and critical concern. Scholars have made deliberate efforts to address the racial issues, language, its oral nature among others; but little attention has been given to the identity and the representation of these identities in African American Literature. This study therefore, is an attempt to examine the concept of identity and its aesthetic representations in African American literature. The study engages a survey of texts in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, speeches, musical forms, rap and film which are selected as a result of their relevance to the research focus. These texts are subjected to critical analysis while references are made to secondary texts where applicable. It is discovered that the literature of the black diaspora considers identity as a major theme in its discourse and this is represented in all forms of their literature. Identity, which could refer to a sense of ownership, is a major concern in the literature of the Black diaspora.

Keywords: aesthetic representation, African American literature, identity, self-recovery

INTRODUCTION

African American literature is primarily anchored on history. The history that sustains African American literature is not just what has happened, but what has been seen to have happened. The historical background that serves as the raw materials with which African American literature is built revolves around the traumatic experiences of Africans, uprooted from their homes (Africa) and transported across the Atlantic ocean to a new world (America) within the context of slavery. Slavery has left indelible marks in the lives and experiences of Africans in Diaspora, ranging from the forced capturing of Africans, the dehumanization of Africans, enslavement, loss of identity and even to the struggle for self-discovery. The process which involves what the slavers called sweetening was an attempt to engage cruel and violent means to subjugate Africans to be subservient to their masters thereby ripping them off their primordial ethos and culture.

The event and history of slavery has been a major concern for African Americans who are constantly faced with the challenge of "Double consciousness" according to W.E.B. DuBois. The great identity question stares closely at the face of every Black American, who is constantly reminded of their origin of servitude and despised by their white counterparts within the context of segregation and cultural intolerance. Within the introductory pages of Du Bois (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk* lies buried the great challenge plaguing the Black folks:

Here, then is the dilemma and has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: what after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty for me to cease

to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only and possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my Black Blood place upon me any more obligations to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would? (P. xii)

The excerpt here foregrounds the state of the slaves and ex-slaves in their new world. They have lost their identity and left in a state of "To be or not to be". This challenging situation has instigated many reactions from African Americans who seek to represent themselves even in the face of misrepresentation. Slavery then becomes the source of Black Diaspora literature which is evident in the peculiar fluid nature of the literature. African American literature defies conformity with the traditional style of writing that respects genre. African American literature is fluid such that it accommodates the integration of the oral elements in their works which give it its uniqueness. African American literature stems from the work songs and verbal stories at the plantations and as such, it introduces these oral components in their literary works. Dasylyva and Jegede (2005, P. 191) lend their voices to the very nature of African American literature:

By its very naming, *African American* literature is a unique tradition that is informed by a sense of cultural dualism right from inception. Historically, the socio-cultural undercurrent responsible for the emergence of this literature is the experience of slavery and the attendant contact and dialogue of the African personality with a new culture. The Africans who were transported to the United States of America (the New World, as it was known then) took with them the intangible but enduring properties of their cultural heritage; the customs, values, traditions, and histories of Africans were reprocessed to compose the peculiar experience and vision of the (black) American writer of African descent. Invariably the overriding thematic preoccupation of the black writer in America has been a passionate concern for race and identity, nationhood and dignity, self-integration and self-assertion and a general *quest* for roots and freedom stemming from the physical and psychological dislocation which slavery had caused.

It is however clear that the coexistence of the transplanted Africa and Europe in the Caribbean has led to the layering and multiplicity of cultural identities. The Black Diaspora identity becomes a recurrent theme in the literary representation of the African Americans.

IDENTITY

The concept of identity and identity development was initially presented by Sigmund Freud, who referred to identity or "inner identity...as an individual's link with the unique values, fostered by a unique history of his people" (Erikson, 1959, p. 102). While introducing the notion of an individual and group identity to resolve personal conflicts between himself and the Jewish people, Freud in 1923 was one of the first to introduce the social and historical dynamics of personal development. According to Freud, identity is the integration of an individual within the group and how he or she learns to interact within that group as well as how he or she interacts with other groups. According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, identity means 'sameness of essential or generic character in different instances', 'the distinguishing character or personality of an individual', 'the condition of being the same with something described or asserted'. In the same vein, the Free Online Dictionary defines identity as 'the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity'. The origin of identity is the Middle French word 'Identite', from Late Latin 'Identiate'. 'Identitas'

probably from Latin 'Identidem', repeatedly contradiction of 'idem et idem' literally 'same as same'. The first known use of identity was in 1570. According to Marx, 'Identity is sense of self, a social, economic location.' One other source reads, 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousnesses.

Identity is a set of "comprehensive gains which the individual, at the end of adolescence, must have derived from all of his pre-adult experience in order to be ready for the tasks of adulthood" (Erikson, 1959, p. 101). Therefore, the concept of identity can be understood as who we are as individuals as well as who we are as members within a group (or groups); and how we equip ourselves (or are equipped) to deal with our past, present, or future environments (Winsell, 1971). Although identity is being shaped and formulated from the minute a child is born, it is most significantly shaped and stabilized during late adolescence and young adulthood (Chickering, 1969). For this reason therefore, a child grows consciously with a mark of identity culturally and otherwise. To be uprooted from your identity or denied its place in the life of an adolescent becomes a major crisis physically and psychologically. This loss of primordial ethnic specificity constitutes the identity crisis faced by African Americans.

In 1959, Erikson described Black identity as a very precarious one, asserting that "any disruption of the 'child like' demeanor of the Negro identity" such as education or unrestricted freedom, would "thrust these Negroes into a dangerous and evil identity stage" (p.37). Erikson went on to postulate that a positive Negro identity was "mild, submissive, dependent, somewhat querulous, but always ready to serve, and with occasional empathy and childlike wisdom" (p.37). Admittedly, Erikson had little or no contact with the "Negro" citizens during that time, however, there are many misrepresentation of the Black identity by onlookers who are merely driven by their sentimental judgment of the black folk. It is therefore this misrepresentation that instigate African Americans to begin to write, act or sing in order to correct and regain their identity.

Unfortunately, the experience of African Americans was, and in many cases is, viewed through the lens of the dominant culture which has resulted in a consistent misdiagnosis or distorted interpretation of the African American experience (Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Banks, 1981; Cross, 1995, 1991; Hauser & Kasendorf, 1983; Helms, 1990a; Hilliard, 1992; Mc Ewen et al., 1990; Myers, 1985; Semaj, 1981).

In an effort to explain the "Negro identity" of the 1950s and 1960s, in his publication *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Warren (1965) conveyed how the African American felt "alienated from the world to which he is born and the country of which he is a citizen, yet surrounded by the successful values of that new world, and country, therefore...how can the Negro define himself' (P. 17)? According to Warren, African Americans shared a collective sense of alienation and forced estrangement from a world that not only refused to acknowledge their presence but also denied them access to those things which contributed to the attainment of not only a healthy identity but also a healthy existence.

Du Bois in his famous work, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) described the experience of being an African American as "hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development"(pp. 130-131). The author also introduced the concept of "dual consciousness" or double identity, equating the African American identity with a split or counterpart identity:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and

Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (p. 4)

Erikson (1959, 1968) reported that both history and experience impact on the identity development of minority groups and other people of colour. While some may view the problems of African American identity development as deficient or negative, Erikson described Negro identity as an adaptive coping technique in which African Americans have learned to protect themselves from potentially troublesome circumstances. "Negro[s] are apt to develop a 'surrendered identity' [which] has reduced many Negro men to the reflection of the 'negative' recognition which surrounds them like an endless recess of distorting mirrors" (p.302).

One of the most widely used and widely known theory of Black identity and Black identity development was developed by researcher Cross (1971, 1991). According to Cross, Black identity is developed within a transformative paradigm within which Blacks first go through a pre-encounter stage in which they identify with the dominant White culture and reject their own culture. In the second stage of Black identity, encounter, individuals reject previous identification with the White culture, seeking instead to identify with Black culture. During the immersion-emersion stage, individuals were completely engrossed in Black culture while completely rejecting White culture. In the last two stages of Cross' model, individuals internalize their Black culture transcending racism and confronting all forms of cultural oppression. The highest level of Black identity development is a stage in which the individual reaches a level of self-concept where he or she is comfortable with his or her identity and is committed to transcending racism and ~~in~~ confronting all forms of cultural oppression.

The African self-consciousness is subject to social-environmental forces and influences. One of the most important aspects of the African self-consciousness phase is that it represents "the conscious embodiment and operationalization of Africanity, or the African survival thrust (the conscious expression of Africanity in Black people)" (Baldwin, 1981, p. 174). Under normal conditions, this phase includes:

- (a) the recognition of oneself as 'African' (biologically, psychologically, culturally, and so forth) and of what being African means as defined by African cosmology;
- (b) the cognition of African survival and proactive development as one's first priority value;
- (c) respect for and active perpetuation of all things African, including African life and institutions;
- (d) a standard of conduct toward all things 'non-African' and toward those things, peoples, and so forth, that are 'anti-African'. (pp. 174-175)

Based on the literature available on identity and the influence of race and ethnicity on identity development of African Americans, several consistent themes have emerged: (a) contemporary African American college students are strongly influenced and affected by their families and community; (b) racial and ethnic relationships between not only White Americans but also between other significant cultural and ethnic minorities must be considered; and (c) historical circumstances have substantially shaped the experiences of African American people. How congruently African Americans are able to consolidate and make sense of their external and an internal environment determines how effectively they

will function, not only within the African American community, but also within society as a whole.

Identity can be classified in different ways. In fact, it is better described as an interdisciplinary concept which can be racial, individual, social, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, cultural, ethnical, national and interpersonal. Notable names in the concept include. Benedict Anderson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Raymond Williams, Mathew Arnold, Heidegger, Camus Sartre etc. They are the spokespersons of this theme, without them if one talk about identity, the issue will be incomplete. If we focus on fiction Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Alice Malsenior Walker, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Rai, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Thiango, Margaret Atwood, Bharti Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayana, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Rohinton Mistry, Vijay Tendulkar, Simon de Beauvoir, Girish Karnad etc. are common names.

BLACK IDENTITY REPRESENTATION

African American literature from its inception has always questioned the idea that humanity is White, the idea that the White man must define the Black man and equally give him space in the scheme of things. This literature signifies that this act of defining is not just because the White defines the Black man but because he will not define the Black man as a separate and independent entity except in relation to him (the white man). In this case, the Black man is not seen as an autonomous being, and if this is to happen, the Black man can never think of himself without the White man. But the White man can think of himself without the Black man which is unfair. In this case, also, the Black man is simply what the White man decrees; hence, the Black man is referred to as the 'other', no more, no less. The Black man is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. The White man is the subject; he is the absolute, and so the Black man is the 'other'. It is this representation of Blacks as the 'other' which African American literature seeks to fight using different literary genres. The Whites had developed the concept of inferiority and distinction through preconceptions rooted in images of blackness and physical differences between the two people. Those negative images were created by English adventurers and traders who visited the African continent. The literature read at that time in England offered a negative portrayal of Africans and their ways of life. The Africans were described as ruthless and even as ugly people. African Americans were given different names like "colored", "Negros", "black" and African American (Baldwin, 1981, Cross, 1991). Therefore, African American literature embodies novels, poems and plays showing the status of race as a whole. The writer's works reflect their identities. What would it mean for representation when representation is marked by an ethical failure on the part of the 'selves', thinkers, writers, activists, and artists? How can one come to terms with this ethical failure toward representation? Perhaps, the desire might be to think of this failure as not a failure on their part as it were owing to de Beauvoir's idea that otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Of course one cannot remain passive in the face of the trend today.

The failure to represent is not a failure as it were, but the origins of a possible ethical way to relate to another; to see in this the beginnings of a community, a collectivity, and a sociality that comes *to be*, allows the — coming-*to-be* to occur, in the mutual telling and retelling of one another's inaudible narratives. Thus, what is often seen is a situation whereby one group sets itself up as the absolute 'one' and then setting up the 'other' against itself.

Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subjected to racist attitudes. This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African American literature, to prove they were the equals of European

American authors. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr, has said, —it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture (Warren, 1965). Exclusionary practice is an ancient phenomenon. The policy of exclusion possibly stems from the same source as classism, racism, sexism, ageism etc., which simply shows the urge to dominate, oppress and exclude others from the scheme of things. Exclusion, mentally, physically, economically, socially and/or politically, remains the basis where power is derived. From the beginning, the urge to dominate, showing off the weaknesses of others has been there. One group has always enjoyed ordering the other Back to the background; one group has always considered the emancipation of the other as a menace; and one group has always detested the other and presented a dangerous competition to the other's existence.

To perpetuate this, one group has always drawn on whatever it could to subjugate the other, drawing especially on philosophy, religion and even science. The American society has tirelessly sought to prove that the African American is inferior, it deems itself superior because it is what it is; therefore, one is not at all surprised to see the kind of treatment meted out to the Black man in the society as he is not given the chance to explain his experience. The Black man's contributions are rarely mentioned because as the — 'other' in society, he is not permitted success, and this may be why his literary production has been seen as inferior. However, by countering the claims of the dominant culture, African American writers are not just proving their worth; they are equally attempting to subvert the literary and power traditions of the United States. Scholars expressing this view are said to be asserting that writing has traditionally been seen as *something defined by the dominant culture as a white/male activity*. This means that, in American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been intimately tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the African Diaspora, African American literature thereby broke *the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power*. This view of African American literature as a tool of struggle for Black political and cultural liberation has been stated for decades, perhaps most famously by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903).

It has always been said that African American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. Somehow, African American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part of modern world literature. The same can be said for African American literature. While it exists fully within the framework of a larger American literature, it also exists as its own entity. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices are created in isolation. The benefit of this is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalise the larger literary world (McKay, 2004). This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the Black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalising American culture.

Some of the criticisms of African American literature over the years have come from within the community; some argue that Black literature sometimes does not portray Black people in a positive light and that it should. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the NAACP's *The Crisis* on this topic, saying in 1921: *We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one*. He added in 1926, *All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists*. DuBois and the editors of *The Crisis* consistently stated that literature was a tool in the struggle for African American political liberation. His belief in the propaganda value of art showed when he clashed in 1928 with the author Claude McKay over his best-selling novel *Home to*

Harlem. Du Bois thought the novel's frank depictions of sexuality and the nightlife in Harlem appealed only to the *prurient demand[s]* of White readers and publishers looking for portrayals of Black *licentiousness*. He said, '*Home to Harlem*' ... *for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath.* (Du Bois, —Two Novels. *The Crisis* 35, June 1928: 202). Others made similar criticism of Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry* in 1929. Addressing prejudice between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Blacks, the novel infuriated many African Americans, who did not like the public airing of their *dirty laundry*.

Of course, literature should be able to present the full truth about life and people, and this is what Hughes articulated in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). He wrote that Black artists intended to express themselves freely no matter what the Black public or White public thought. More recently, some critics accused Alice Walker of unfairly attacking black men in her novel *The Color Purple*. In his updated 1995 introduction to his novel, *Oxherding Tale*, Charles Johnson criticized Walker's novel for its negative portrayal of African American males: *I leave it to readers to decide which book pushes harder at the boundaries of convention, and inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet*. For some critics, there is no such thing as Black literature. There's good literature and bad literature. And that's all. But White writers' literary treatment of the Black presence has been studied more by historians than literary scholars. While literary scholars – Toni Morrison, John Cooley, and Leslie Fiedler – have examined literary attitudes towards Black presence; they discuss major nineteenth and twentieth century fiction writers. Toni Morrison's definition of presence in analysing African American literature is worthy of note; she made reference to the transformation of Black physical presence into an imaginative literary presence. Thus, the literary depictions by African Americans demonstrate that Black writers reveal their cultural authority. They are able to adopt multiple perspectives to interpret the Black experience as a cultural text.

Black culture and the symbolic representation of major African American concerns within the film are the concerns of Johnson (2018) in his essay on the film titled *Black Panther*. In his analysis of the film text, Johnson comments on it as being beyond just a story of a super hero. He engages it as a text celebrating black skin, black identity, black origin and the ideological leanings within the black society, among others. Yet, Johnson does not engage the semiotic leanings of the text and how these represent or identify the Black diaspora.

In addition, music has erupted time and again in scholarly discourse as one that penetrates this issue of identity and representation in the Black diaspora, be it reggae, hymns, hip-hop, rhythm and blues, jazz or rap, among others. From the perspective of rap, Kendrick Lamar's music has also featured in researches targeted at understanding identity and representation. Petrusich (2018) focused on the fierce realness in Lamar's lyrical identity and unique form which she described as "unapologetic" about its "profitability". In the paper, she focused on the African American art of rap and its evolution over time within the American society but not on the semiotic depictions of identity and representation within the text.

CONCLUSION

Identity as a major concern in the literature of the Black diaspora has received many layers of interpretations in the aesthetic representations of the black diaspora. Over the years, Blacks in diaspora have become a force to reckon with in every sphere of life, be it literature; music; politics; sports; science; astronomy and film, to mention but a few. One major motif that one might find common in these various spheres is the way Blacks use these platforms to engage and represent the theme of identity, especially in aesthetic proportions. Identity, in whatever period, continues to reverberate as a very strong motif and an instigator in the literary art of

Blacks in diaspora, that is, African Americans and Caribbeans. This has led to the conceptualization of what is now called Black diaspora identity. Identity, here, could refer to a sense of ownership. As aforementioned, the concept of identity would engage both the way Blacks identify themselves and, on the flip side, how Whites identify them.

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