

# প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

*A journal of Humanities & Social Science*

Published by: Dept. of Bengali

Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: www.thecho.in

## **Quest for Identity: A Major Concern in the Life and Literature of African-Americans**

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### Abstract

The painful and tragic experience of the African- Americans in the United States of America led them to struggle for and establish an identity of their own. The survey of the history of the African- American people in different geographical spaces such as the African homeland, the middle passage, the American South and then the industrialized North, presents a picture where identity has been the foremost casualty in a history of displacement and migration, embittered by a conflict with the majority voice, engaged in a struggle for survival against unexpected suffering. The tragedy was that the African- American's quest for identity began over the things for which he himself was not responsible- his black colour, his race, his ancestors, and his physic. All this led the black men to turn himself into an object. It is under such circumstances that an unending and always expanding quest for identity began. Both the African- American men and women were the victims but there is a marked difference in their approach. While the men had to fight only in terms of race and class, the women were additionally burdened with the issues of gender as they saw that it is not only the white man but also the black man who often ill-treated them or misrepresented them in the literature.

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The experience of the African-American people, one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States of America today, has been varied, painful and tragic. For this minority group displacement, deprivation, suffering,

marginalization, resistance, survival, and an urge to create and assert a sense of identity against the process of marginalization, has been the burden of history. Deprived of any sense of identity or any satisfying feeling of the

self, they throughout the centuries have been engaged in attempts to define their existence in definite terms. Their cultural aspiration, as expressed in their literature, seems to revolve round an inevitable urge to reinvent and reassert an identity of their own. This turns out to be their primary quests.

Identity may be thought of in terms of self-personal, group or societal. There is no objective or a priori definition of self or essence, that is, of the unit's identity or of what qualities the unit should display. What its identity consists of is those aspects of its existence which enable its constituent frame of reference or meaning. According to *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, identity as a concept can be defined "as the search for self and its relationship to social contexts and realities" (Gates.p-270). What the existential thread or meaning is that which allows them to hang together is a matter of observation, not a priori definition. There is no such thing as the essential nature of human beings or groups, that is, a priori characteristics which transcend individual variations or exist whether persons or groups actually display them or are aware of them.

The African-Americans in their passage through slavery had to struggle to establish a sense of identity, to find a voice, and to

claim a political and cultural space in the United States of America. This murderous transit has formed and reinforced an autonomous sense of black identity. Black literature, music and culture are a testament to that story. Africans were first brought to America as slaves and in this process they were displaced from their native land and culture.

They were hurled into a new land, strange and hostile, where, for a second time they felt the slow, painful process of a new place and as a result of this confronted a concerned attack on a stable sense of identity. They could neither call themselves Africans nor Americans. The institution of slavery, thus, forced on the African-Americans a strange culture. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. In the New World the Negro, not only lost his culture but his very personal name. He was either given a Christian name or the surname of his master so that he could be easily identified that, he belonged to a particular master. The Negro, in this process lost his very personal indicator of identity.

The colour of the skin “is the most obvious outward manifestation of race” and so “it has been made the criterion by which men are judged irrespective of their social or educational attainments” (Burns.p-16). In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema, where, the common remark made by the white was “Look a Negro” or “Mama, see the Negro I’m frightened” (Fanon.p-110). Along with the colour of the skin, the physical features like hair, stature also made the life of a Negro miserable. The imperialists of Europe made their profits by making the black bodies, the ‘big business’ of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which only a few industries of the world could yield. Their hunger for more wealth increased the importation of the Black slaves. But these Europeans, whenever, they saw that the populations of the Black slaves were exceeding the whites, they transported them to other places. In this process many Black families were broken. The African-Americans, thus, lost the sense of a definite kinship. This is the effect of forced migration.

The Africans, transported to this New World also lost their primitive religion. The religion which had helped them together was snatched from them and they were given the new religion of

Christianity. The Blacks, to some extent responded as fervently as did the rest of mankind to the exhortations of the Quakers in their call for liberty, equality and fraternity, to the expressed conviction that all men are equal in the eyes of God. But soon they were disillusioned. Their captivity under Christendom blasted their lives, disrupted their families, reached down into the personalities of each one of them and destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided their minds and feelings in the effort to live. To evade the prevailing Christian injunction that all baptized men are free and equal, they culled from the Bible many quotable verses admonishing the slaves to be true to their masters. They extended Christian salvation to them without granting the boon of freedom. When praises were sung to God, it was enforced that the Blacks must not lift their voices in common hymn.

Each of the white man created an all-powerful atmosphere of ambition and passion in which the black slaves became the objects of exploitation. To protect their delicately balanced edifice of political power, the lords of the land proceeded to neutralize the strength of the blacks and the growing restlessness of the poor whites by dividing and ruling the Blacks, by inciting them against

one another. At this stage division also occurred among the Black communities. One group went against the other and in this process they began to lose their communal identity. The bringing in of the slaves or slavery as an institution was not confined only to the blacks. Even whites, because of abject poverty, were engaged in the plantation as slave-labour. In the case of the blacks, however, the exploitation had two dimensions, based on race and class. Whereas the consideration of race was used to create a sense of restlessness and division along the colour line, class considerations enforced among the black people established a class oriented hierarchy of the ruled and the ruler when a section of the black labourers were engaged as slaves drivers or overseers. This in its turn further destroyed the sense of community life or any possibility of organization of the slaves as a community. This characteristic colonial feature dominated and contributed to the sufferings of the African-Americans for a long time.

The African-Americans were also denied education. Their black bodies were regarded as good tools that had to be kept efficient for labour and hard work. Therefore, when schools were built, it was decided that the Blacks must not partake of the teaching in the schools. The

whites leaped upon the road of progress and their leap was the windfall of the tragedy of the Blacks. The excessive love of life wove a deadly web of slavery; their sense of the possibility of building a more human world brought devastation and despair to the Blacks. The African-American desire to learn, to be able to use language as a tool for emancipation is very poignantly expressed in the *Narrative of The Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave*, written by himself. He very poignantly states; 'the means of knowing was withheld from me' (p-12). Even the Sunday schools were a mere mockery of education to the slaves. The desire to be able to read and use language to articulate grievances has been and still a very significant feature in the African-American quest for identity. Frederick Douglass ironically states:

*the more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers.....As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! That very discontentment with which Master Huger had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unalterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing (P-33).*

That was Frederick Douglass in 1845. But African-American history has since then been a struggle to master language and use writing as action in the search to understand and express a sense of the self.

A shared sense of the past plays a pivotal role in the way values and visions are transmitted from one generation to the next. History is part of a society's attempt to structure a self image and to communicate a common identity. The African-Americans unable to assimilate and integrate with the whites began to look back to their African past. The new American nationality was inescapably English in language, ideas and traditions because it was able to melt all the European customs and traditions leaving the black Americans outside the plate. Their folkways and folktales, which had once given meaning and sanction to their actions faded from the Black consciousness. They were now no longer the typical Negro nor were they regarded as equal to the sense of identifiable self, which would not oversimplify the multiplicity of simultaneously being an African, an American, and a human being.

The Negro's search for identity began over the things for which he himself was not responsible. He was not responsible for his black colour, for his body, for his race, for his

ancestors, but still then he was subjected to crude definition as a mute object. The white men by capturing the black men in Africa and bringing them to slavery in America killed the black men-killed him mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, politically, and morally. Hated from outside and therefore hating himself, the Negro was bound to take him far off from his own presence and contribute to the process of turning himself into an object. All he wanted was to be a man among other men and live in a world that he could say, also, belonged to him, but which ironically was denied to him. A concomitant to this state is an unending and always expanding Quest for identity in an ever changing context.

African-American fiction uses the above stated historical forces as the backdrop. For the African-American writers, men and women, it has been unending individual quests as part of the larger quest of the community for a sense of identity, however changing, fragile and temporary it may be. A study of African-American culture and its literary expression of identity is defined essentially by the dimension of race and in some cases class. The African-American fiction came to be seen as dominated by the struggle for freedom from all discriminations and also striving

to establish one's identity as an African-American. The male writers also portray the African-American male protagonists engaged in a quest for identity through an alternating pattern of withdrawal from and involvement with the community, and the female characters as stereotypical one dimensional figure. They remained concerned only with the black male psyche and at times even branded their women with a negative image.

The writings of the African-American woman, though runs parallel to the writings of men, have their own particular views-that of gender. The institution of slavery branded them within the narrow scope of certain stereotype images which denied the scope of a fully

developed notion of the self. The women saw that, in most cases the slave narrative or the later day writings of the black male failed to give a correct picture or expression to the idea of a complete woman. The negative stereotype image of black woman continued to show its presence in contemporary writings while the other aspects of the Negro life went through a series of change. The African-American women, thus, not only had to fight in terms of race and class but also had to struggle to change the negative images in their real life as well as literature. They seem to give greater importance to community involvement, thus designing more prominent and centrally dominant position for the African-American women.

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