

The Formation of the African American Community in the United States

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For my parents and my sister.

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Abstract

The literature of the Diaspora is particularly interesting in the contemporary world as more and more people come to find themselves voluntarily or involuntarily displaced. Displacement is the material reality of globalization. Even as there are political reverberations, it is the psychological trauma that forms the basis of my study. This is because each group negotiates with the new social context in a different way. Some groups may look to migration with optimism because of the new life that a new location promises. Other groups like the African slaves were forcefully transported en masse to America, and saw it as the destruction of a way of life for commercial gains. This combined with their economic disenfranchisement to make it difficult to achieve oneness with their new locale. It will be the effort of this paper to focus particularly on the manner in which the African American people regrouped through negotiations with itself and the dominant white population. In order to understand their vulnerabilities and the ways in which they sought to strengthen themselves, I will be looking at a range of texts over a period of time since identity formation is a lengthy process. Although assimilation would be the key to integration, I will be looking at this extent to which this is possible as well as desirable.

Introduction

The Formation of the African American Community in the United States

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down

Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered Zion.

When the wicked

Carried us away in captivity

Required from us a song

Now how shall we sing the lord’s song in a strange land.”

- The Melodies, “Rivers of Babylon”¹

The story of the people of the black community is one that continues to bemoan dispossession and discrimination. Discourses from Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution to the role of the New World in the White Man’s Burden were an integral part of the propaganda used to justify the actions of the European explorers and colonisers in their kidnapping, looting, neutralisation of resistance, and sale of the natives from Africa to their distribution to the rest of the world. From this began nearly three hundred years of servitude. Despite the American President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the Civil War in America (1861–1865), the attempts made at progressing beyond the

¹ “Rivers of Babylon Lyrics” Accessed on: 18 November, 2012.
<<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/hardtheycome/riversofbabylon.htm>>

severe brutalisation of a people continues to face challenges that are economic, sociological, political, lingual as well as historical in nature. The reverberations of the slave trade, of regarding human beings as chattels to be owned, continue to make its presence felt in the contemporary world.

The colonised and once-enslaved people have to deal with the imposition of a significant psychological limbo. This includes negotiations with the capitalist economy to overcome the cultural hegemony of the West, resulting in events like the American Civil War, the Reconstruction (1865–1877), or counter-movements like the Harlem Renaissance (1918–1937), the Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968) etc, just to name a few. These movements were primarily concerned with freeing the black subject from the implications that were imposed on his/her skin by the Western decoding of the African continent and its people. This required a challenge directed at the conceptualisation of the ‘New World’ as a locale that supports the dominant group’s interpretations of the world. This was because “such characterizations of the place are all attempts to fix meanings and often to enclose them: to give places single, fixed identities and to define them as bounded and enclosed, characterized by their own internal history, and through their differentiation from “outside”.”² This characterisation of the space further alienates the black subject trying to come to terms with the place they hail from and with questions of identity in the post-colonial context.

The internalisation of the white worldview led to the belief that it was only in achieving Western traits that the black subject could acquire the sort of ease with which his/her

² Massey, Doreen. “Double Articulation: A Place in the World”. *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Ed. Angelika Bammer. Place: Indiana University Press, 1994. 114.

white counterpart can exist in a polarised world. Fanon describes this psychological symptom aptly in "The Negro and Language" where "Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation. ... He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle."³ Thus, the juxtaposition of the East and the West is invested with associations that remain as a standard that can be referred to during moments of interaction. Fanon explains in the same essay how the erasure of the subject's own culture became a prerequisite for his/her success in the globalised context in which he/she operates. In the post-colonial world, the colonised native who has been to the mother country is hailed as a demigod upon his/her return. Imperialism began with the power play between civilisations. The Other subject is exposed to a yardstick developed by former colonials. The standard continues to insist on the superiority of the Western civilisation, and therefore, the former master's right to first class citizenry. The subject begins to feel a sense of alienation from their environment unable to accede to the inferiority they are branded with; they become convinced that 'real life' awaits them in the West, and so, the brief period of stay there would be necessary for the lifelong effect that a glimpse of Western civilisation could leave on the subject.

However, the transition has a different impact on the African Americans living on American soil. For those slaves who were transported there, the period of slavery and the aftermath when they were emancipated was one in which they had to deal with the implications of being a black individual who has to live vis-à-vis their former masters.

³ Fanon, Frantz. "The Negro and Language". *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967. 18.

Prolonged stay made the land theirs by default, but this did not make them stop noticing their difference because they continued to exist as second class citizens. It is in this way that the lyrics of the song I quoted above deals with the alienation of the African Americans living in America. The song "Rivers of Babylon" piqued my interest about the way in which the black community sought to rebuild itself in a land where they were brought to by force. The erasure of their past meant that they could only emulate their European masters' sensibilities. This claim to a Western sensibility represented a contradiction to black individuals because their assertions against the inherent backwardness of their community took place through their internalisation of a way of life that they did not develop themselves. Their presence in America was not the result of a natural progression of history but an infiltration that threw their way of life into disarray. Thus, their claim to the land was fraught with the memory of their removal from their origins in Africa. However, this was not the only way in which the land was regarded. It was also the only home they knew, although it had been a difficult one. Attempts were made to embrace America as their homeland by their recreation of their own lives there. The release from the economic and political hegemony is said to take place during the Reconstruction, which lasted from 1865 to 1877 in the annals of American history. However, an examination of the present-day situation of the African American community would reveal that they still have a long way to go before they could reorganise themselves as a viable unit capable of representing itself without the indeterminacy that comes with the act of 'becoming'.

This directed my interest to the process by which a community may liberate itself from the yoke given the complete erasure of their past, the recovery of which may have been the first step towards their attempt at self-recovery. I wanted to look particularly at the

way the black community's artists have contributed to this process by examining their representation of themselves in their literature. I felt that the song "River of Babylon" adequately captured the central paradox in the African American's existence in America. This was because in other parts of the world that were colonised, such as India, there was a tendency towards an examination of the institution left behind by the coloniser, which also included a critical engagement with them. This assessment led to their revocation or incorporation into the 'Indian' framework. The effort was to remake the nation state along a decidedly 'Indian' way even if some remnants of the coloniser were retained. This new construction supported an 'Indian' sensibility.

Therefore, in Chapter One, I will look at slave narratives which were the earliest of political writings by the black community in America to challenge the discriminatory practices. Their task was to bring an end to slavery by depicting themselves as humans. The fact that they were surviving on the margins meant that integration with the mainstream through the endowment of equal rights and citizenship was necessary for a proper place in American society. Publishing needed to be a supremely confident act given that they were making themselves open to criticism as well as appreciation. The primary motivation, however, was to have their voices heard, to be the mouthpiece for their own community, and to be actively involved in the struggle for freedom. This led to certain ways in which the writers tried to depict themselves, which I felt hindered as well as furthered the full-fledged expression of the artist in different ways. I felt that an investigation of the area of silence in the literature produced would reveal the extent to which the community was actually able to represent itself in the face of imposing odds. In order to do this, I chose authors of both sexes, namely *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) by Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813–1897) and *Narrative of the*

Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845) by Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) to see if gender impacted the way they sought to go about writing about themselves.

The American Civil War (1861–1865) between the northern and the southern states formally ended slavery. The period that followed is chronicled as the rehabilitation. The Reconstruction (1865–1877) was meant to rebuild the South and create a space for the majority of blacks who had lived in America as slaves. However, it was not the end of their struggle because their liberation did not emancipate them from the social and cultural underpinnings of their racial difference. Despite the civilising influence of living with their white masters, the blacks were still believed to be unequipped for participation in the mainstream. Meanwhile, the ‘mainstream’ and the dominant white community became interchangeable terms. Although the blacks were believed to be separate and unrelated to the whites, they were still tethered to the latter’s precepts when it came to finding a consciousness. This led to the belief that the negative caricatures about the black individual needed to be addressed and supplanted by a ‘New Negro’ identity that blacks could refer back to for positive reinforcements.

It was during the Harlem Renaissance (1920–1930s) that the glass ceiling of the ‘Old Negro’ was tackled by a range of black artists. I wanted to examine this new black cultural consciousness that had a political agenda. In order to do so I looked at a range of polemical texts from this era by writers like Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker etc. In particular, I was interested in the black artist’s self-representation because this time they did not need to be concerned about the requirements of the mainstream where deliberate efforts were made to exclude them. The socially

committed literature also discussed the role of the black artist. Should the artist compose 'art for art's sake' or should s/he look to give a direction to the epiphanies experienced by the black community? To what extent should they be involved in etching out a new cultural identity for what it meant to be African American in America?

Finally, it was only when one knows who one is that they can try to engage with their place in the world and make efforts to become a part of it. This is what Chapter Three is concerned with. With the passage of time, a distinct way of life was constructed by the black community by formulating 'black' popular culture. This meant that the mainstream came to stand for 'white' culture. After the likes of Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington who achieved prominence during the Harlem Renaissance, the period after the counterculture movement saw the rise of figures like Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama etc. Although the community's struggle for equal opportunities in every sphere of life was yet to reach the finish line, it would probably be justified to state that the black community was now in the process of forcing its entry into the mainstream. At the same time, this was the reality of a very small constituent of the African American community in the United States. These figures managed to do this by constructing an identity that had elements of both 'white' and 'black' culture. These two ethnicities were combined to constitute an acceptable American self. Also, the concept of an 'American' identity was the subject of much deliberation due to immigration in America reaching new peaks in the era of globalisation. However, this does not mean that America is recognised by its occupants as the 'New World' – where one may reconstruct oneself anew as opposed to the 'Old World' – since the creation of the Diaspora has also resulted in illegal immigrants, increased hate crimes against those of other races, fears that the so-called dominant white community will lose its hegemonic control etc. Thus, in Chapter Three, I

will seek to study the extent to which assimilation into 'Americanism' was possible and viewed as desirable.

The questions I have outlined in the three chapters of my paper will combine to give the reader an idea of the situation from which the black community began on the fringes in America and tried to achieve a secure position in the mainstream. This is because the mainstream is believed to be the normative, and acceptance therein becomes a token gesture of overall acceptance of the black individual into America. I have had to look at different time periods in each chapter because identity formation is a lengthy process when it has to deal with overwhelming odds that question its standing. Consciousness is said to transform with each experience that markedly belongs to the period that shapes the way in which the individual engages with the world and with him/herself as well. Each text in this paper deals with the issue of living in the Diaspora, the anxieties of displacement and the certainties of identity that come undone with shifts in one's geographical positioning.

Chapter One

The significance of slave narratives

Slave narratives were written by emancipated or fugitive slaves as well as abolitionists. They were one of the first and primary means by which the black community sought to talk about its presence in American history. In America, slave narratives started appearing in the eighteenth century. "The generic field includes spiritual autobiography, the conversion narrative, the providential tale, criminal confession, Indian captivity narrative, sea adventure story, and the picaresque novel."⁴ The texts were originally intended to entertain by presenting the exotic terrains that European explorers discovered during their voyages. The first voices raised against the institution of slavery coincided with the European Enlightenment and the construction of antislavery societies in the 1770s and 1780s in Britain.

The proslavery arguments defended the institution of slavery. Travelogues, whether fictitious or autobiographical, and other similar pseudo-social, -scientific and -anthropological texts from that period, documented scenes of chaos and cannibalism in the New World. They recorded and 'proved' that unregulated freedom fostered such practices. Meanwhile, the slave narratives began as oral narratives that were transmitted through the intensely personal nature of the storytelling at the microcosmic level of the black family. This made them irrelevant to the dominant white community. A black community, by contrast, did not really exist per se. Those who were black sought to reach

⁴ Fisch, Audrey A. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Date Accessed: 21 April, 2012.

<http://books.google.com.bd/books?id=mqbGYGOizhEC&pg=PA166&lpg=PA166&dq=the+cambridge+companion+to+the+african+american+slave+narrative&source=bl&ots=vMbyMzcNaK&sig=Wnky5vQdUf19MIGImjorEv76jCY&hl=en&sa=X&ei=ooWST7aaE4TyrQfCvMSHBQ&sqi=2&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=the%20cambridge%20companion%20to%20the%20african%20american%20slave%20narrative&f=false>

out to each other and existed as a fragile entity that was constantly in a state of near dissolution because nothing in its members' lives could be for sure. Even as it existed as an avenue for emotional support, the members could not seek the protection of its bulwarks to ward off the disintegration of the self that came with years of dehumanisation and living at the mercy of the slaveholder's whim. Thus, the movement from orality to textuality, in the format of the politically charged slave narrative, was a paradigmatic shift. The slave narratives played the public role of creating empathy. They operated on two levels as Black historiography as well as American 'indigenous' literature. Alongside generating awareness and questioning the institution that claimed to civilise the 'heathen', slave narratives engaged the writer in a therapeutic process, which contested the indoctrination of their status as nonhumans.

In the two famous slave narratives that I will be examining in this chapter, I will attempt to study the implications of writing to a white audience by tracing the anxiety of authorship displayed by the writer. The two texts are *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) by Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) and Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813–1897), respectively. The authors were aware of the interest and outrage that the publication of their narrative would generate because their community's disempowerment meant that they did not have any social standing apart from their value as an economic unit. The need to be a commercial success was combined with their role as the spokesperson for their disenfranchised community. Even as the writers put forward a strong argument against slavery in the story of their struggle, there were silences in the narratives that left much to be said regarding the institution as well as the reconstruction of life after slavery. Although presented in the form of an autobiography, the narrative does not recount the

growth of the artist into maturity. It aimed to be a political tract that highlighted the ills of slavery. The genre of the slave narrative etched out the intimate details to give way to a text that was primarily concerned with negotiating inclusion into the mainstream. The text was the medium by which its subject argued his/her existence on American soil and sought participation in American society. As a political tract, esoteric details were excluded for they could alienate the audience by underscoring difference. This was the basis for their classification as the Other. It weighed as a drawback at this juncture and would further the purpose of the Orientalists. Finally, an in-depth delineation of their life would modify the significance of the text from a political tract to an anthropological document outlining personal concerns. This could reduce the significance of the narrative from a text arguing for freedom to one that simply depicted the life of the slave sans value judgements. The black writers sought to make their point primarily through the display of intellect, rationality, and a Western sensibility.

The treatment of the subject matter

Tentativeness pervaded the subject matter, revealing the implications on the psyche of living in a hostile environment that demanded subservience. At the same time, the writers voiced dissent against their enslavement in the arguments and evidence that they forwarded against the institution. Douglass resists attempts to obfuscate his existence by clearly identifying himself as an "American" in the title page. As an American citizen, he had already been vested with the right to have his voice heard as outlined in the American Declaration of Independence where "whenever any form of government becomes destructive ... it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such

form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect [sic] their safety and happiness.”⁵ The deliberate elision of his African roots that he was otherwise recognised by in his daily interaction in the material sphere indicated his right to a say in policy-making, and therefore, the mainstream in a significant manner. It underscored his right to be heard as an American, and challenged his subordination by comparing the history of his people to the Pilgrim Fathers’ persecution in Europe. The parallel underscores the unconstitutional act of suppressing the voice of a fellow human being, especially one who was no foreigner. This prepared the readership for what is to come.

Douglass and Jacobs were up against a larger reality where a black individual’s stand against slavery equated to the feared slave insurrection. This prevented the slaveholder from completely trusting in the contingency of the institutional setup, and required them to subjugate their subjects permanently. The paranoia was taken to new heights in the public attention received by former/fugitive slaves, and the existence of manuscripts awaiting publication that urged readers to a redefinition of the nation state through a critical engagement with the material reality. One viable way would be through the condition where “A mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it.”⁶ Thus, it became important to cushion these radical slave narratives that protested against the status quo through attestations by white persons. This was because their self-identification as a former/fugitive slave in itself discredited what

⁵ “Declaration of Independence”. *The Pennsylvania Packet*. July 8, 1776. Web. Date Accessed: 15 April, 2012. <<http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/freedom/doi/text.html>>

⁶ Gellner, Ernest. “Definitions.” *Nations and Nationalism*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994.

they may have to say where “In no trial or hearing under this act shall the testimony of such alleged fugitive be admitted in evidence...”⁷ This invalidated whatever evidence they may seek to present. Their radicalism may be remade into the trouble-making antics of stymied minds seeking to infiltrate the sort of anarchy that the institution was vigilant against. Thus, WM. Lloyd Garrison Boston (1805–1879) acted as a mediator and wrote in his preface to Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative that similar cases of cruelty against slaves were noted in Maryland where owners have been known to kill in cold blood without fear of legal retribution – “By the slave code, [the slaves] are adjudged to be as incompetent to testify against a white man, as though they were indeed a part of the brute creation.”⁸

The slave narrative was a political act challenging the discourses insisting on the superiority of the white race. The black natives existed as a silent object waiting to be rendered intelligible in the due course of the Orientalist’s study. The natives existed because they were sighted and cited by their European counterparts. This also made the slave narratives vulnerable to charges of fiction-writing by resisting white readers. The general tendency was to disbelieve that the inferior mind of a black individual could have penned such an elaborate argument in the display of coherent thoughts or that he/she could have mastered literacy, which were understood to be a European prerogative.

The backup provided by white abolitionists implicated that the text had been read by scholarly white individuals. The understanding was that the instances noted in the

⁷ “Fugitive Slave Act”. 1850

Date Accessed: 11 April, 2012. <<http://www.nationalcenter.org/FugitiveSlaveAct.html>>

⁸ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Massachusetts: The Anti-Slavery Office. 1845. The Project Gutenberg. 10 January, 2006. Date Accessed: 8 March, 2012. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

narrative had been given due consideration and judged to have semblances of accuracy about life in slavery. This was all the more so given Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1811–1896) intention to add Harriet Ann Jacobs' experience as a slave woman in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853). Stowe admits that “the book had a purpose entirely transcending the artistic one, and accordingly encounters at the hand of the public demands not usually made on fictitious works. It is *treated* as a reality...”⁹ [author's italics] Stowe's narrative was a work of the imagination that contained accounts inspired from real life incidents. Factors like her femininity and the importance of upholding codes of respectability had the potential of discouraging her desire to publish in order to refrain from the workings of the market. The disadvantages of becoming public that publication involved weighed heavily on any woman of virtue. However, as a narrative, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was more authentic than the depiction by a black author who may actually hail from the antebellum South. Thus, the first hand experience of the black writer did not automatically make him/her an expert in the matter. It had to be proof read and moderated by a white editor whose name and standing gave the text legitimacy and even help with legality when it came to individuals who have escaped from slavery.

The characteristic hesitation in antislavery texts and their periphery status may seem particularly strange in light of the canonical space accorded to later works like the 1937 Pulitzer Prize winner, *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Margaret Mitchell's (1900–1949) historical romance reminisces about the plantation times in the Southern states of

⁹ Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*. Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1854. Date Accessed: 21 April, 2012.
<<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=StoKeyu.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1>>

America. Even with the greater degree of sensitisation to race issues in the 1930s, during the making of the film, the screenwriter, Sidney Howard (1891–1939), applauded Mitchell in a letter, stating that her black characters were “the best written darkies, I do believe, in all literature ... They are the only ones I have ever read which seemed to come through uncolored by white patronizing.”¹⁰ *Gone with the Wind* was partly an apologia for the Old South and represents the black population as unequipped for emancipation. Howard’s review of Mitchell’s representation completely sidesteps pro-black works that deal with the politics of representing a marginal community in America that should have been able to have an equal place in the mainstream. Instead the popularity that Mitchell’s historical romance can still command poses questions about the current position of the African American community. It questions whether the blacks can negotiate a niche that will impede their fall into the obscurity of the margins? Mitchell, by contrast, does not need anyone to intercede on her behalf. *Gone with the Wind* caught the imagination of the audience in such a way that there have been several attempts to write sequels to it such as *Scarlett* (1991) and *Rhett Butler’s People* (2007).

The film and novel, *Gone with the Wind*, divided the black characters into good and bad in accordance with their meekness and aggression respectively, depending on their interaction with the whites. A narrow definition of the black individual was formed, and s/he was required to conform to a set of stock characteristics to be given some degree of space and visibility in what would remain a predominantly white society. For instance, Mammy was a good black woman because she chose to scorn freedom and continued to serve the O’Hara household in the position of an unpaid servant as if that was her only

¹⁰ Leff, Leonard J. “*Gone with the Wind* and Hollywood’s Racial Politics”. *The Atlantic Monthly* (1999). Web. Date Accessed: 12 April, 2012. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/99dec/9912leff.htm>>

purpose in the plot. To accept this portrayal without realising its one-dimensionality speaks volumes about the filmmaker's acceptance of Mitchell's authority on the black community. The hesitancy of the black slave writers and the Northerners stand in sharp contrast with the ease with which Mitchell's nostalgia was indulged by her readership despite the developments in political correctness and race awareness during Mitchell's period and after. The cult status of the movie, its success across the globe, and its confirmed place in the classics are other instances that question the leanings of the audience and those that deliberate on the canon.

Like *Gone with the Wind*, slave narratives delved into the inaccessible quarters of the slave's life. They were incorporated into the efforts made by white abolitionists in America. Those in the industrial North of America were in favour of free labour, and did not want the advancement of the socio-economic system of slavery beyond the Southern states. "The free-labor ideology, with its emphasis on the virtue of work and the possibility of upward social mobility, appealed to opponents of slavery on economic and moral grounds."¹¹ The North, therefore, became the focal point of freedom, and helped to proliferate the word to the literate and thinking sections of society. It involved writing back to the centre, with the added justification that the black narrators were recording their own life, since writing and publication were hitherto the prerogative of the white community. The North also became the place to escape to for those blacks who chose to make a run for it.

Pseudo-anthropological evidence and slavery

¹¹ Ford, Lacy. ed. *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction*. West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005. Web. Date Accessed: 17 April, 2012.
<http://books.google.com.bd/books?id=xeQAERwie80C&pg=PT28|&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Slave narratives sought in particular to expose the myth of the 'happy darky' where visiting clergymen were presented with a front that convinced them that slavery "[was] a beautiful "patriarchal institution"; that the slaves don't want their freedom; that they have hallelujah meetings, and other religious privileges."¹² Another aim was to present the black community as rational, law-abiding beings to quell white fears about the anarchy that would follow with the removal of the reins. Thus, the representations and testimonies by slaves who were interviewed about the living conditions in the proslavery texts were deconstructed as distortion and fabrication respectively because misinformation played a significant role in justifying the socio-economic setup in the South. The texts by black writers also had the effect of installing themselves as the authority on issues pertaining to their community.

Both the narratives examined try to penetrate the façade maintained by the Southern masters as the benevolent paternalist who provided protection and dispensed acts of kindness in return for the services of their slaves. Thus, George W. Freeman (1798–1858), the second Episcopal bishop of Arkansas and Provincial Bishop of Texas, explicates that the Fall had implications on the human race in the generation of inequality among the earth's population. To negotiate with this and to bring order, the institution of slavery was formulated, and "[s]ervitude was recognized as a necessary condition, and patiently, if not cheerfully, submitted to, in every variety of form. Patriarchs, or heads of families, held in subjection to their authority, not only the inferior branches of their respective tribes, together with their *hired* labourers and menials, but also *servants*

¹² Jacobs, Harriet Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. p. 83

"bought with their money," or "born in their houses"--that is, *slaves*."¹³ [author's italics]

Slaveholders depicted their slaves as extended members of the family, children who never naturally mature into adulthood, which was a stage where they could engage with the material conditions of life on their own. Their stultification necessitated responsibility that was willingly shouldered by the white master. For instance, Richard H. Colfax (1825–1871) concluded that anatomical studies identified a correlation between the mind and the size of the brain. The finding suggested that the "[the African's] *want of capability to receive [sic] a complicated education renders it improper and impotitic [sic], that he should be allowed the privileges of citizenship in an enlightened country.*"¹⁴ [author's italics] Colfax adds that this was apparent from a comparative study of the 'progress' that the Westerners and the Africans had made from what he presumes to be the same starting point. By this, he posits the model of European model of development as absolute. The European delineation of progress was applied to Africa without a conceptual understanding of the system at work in the Other's civilisation, and found to be wanting. While European nations have 'evolved', he underscores the failure of the African native to "raise themselves above their present equivocal station, in the great zoological chain"¹⁵ despite the equal passage of time. The African native was measured against the European norm and declared to be lagging. Timelessness was an inherent

¹³ Freeman, George W. *The Rights and Duties of Slaveholders: Two Discourses Delivered on Sunday, November 27, 1836, in Christ Church, Raleigh, North-Carolina*. Charleston: A.E. Miller, Printer to the Protestant Episcopal Society for the Advancement of Christianity in South -Carolina. Charleston, 1837. Web. Date Accessed: 4 April 2012

<<http://www1.assumption.edu/users/lknoles/douglassproslaveryargs.html>>

¹⁴ Colfax, Richard H. *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs, of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes*. New York: James T.M. Bleakley Publishers, 1833. Web. Date Accessed: 17 April, 2012.

<<http://www1.assumption.edu/users/lknoles/douglassproslaveryargs.html>>

¹⁵ Colfax, *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs, of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes*.

<<http://www1.assumption.edu/users/lknoles/douglassproslaveryargs.html>>

characteristic of their African primitivism, and justified their subjugation because it was the only way their backwardness could be contended. This responsibility to take civilisation to Africa was shouldered by the Western Man.

Even Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* does not extend her sympathy for her African American community to her brethren in Africa. Linda combines the slaveholder and the African natives in the same category of barbarity when she says "Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa."¹⁶ Here, those who are racially black are not a monolithic lump; Linda finds a way to tell them apart so that when she uses the term "savages", she refers to the infidel African native and not the African Americans in the States. They are differentiated by their religious practices. The white slaveholders who misrepresent the Bible and the heathens in Africa who have failed to receive the true faith are collapsed into the same category because of their common straying from the Christian God. The African American presence on American soil is not mourned. Douglass only goes as far as to note his reaction upon reading about the history of his people. He states in Chapter Seven that "I could regard [my enslavers] in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery."¹⁷ However, contact with the colonisers in the manner of the civilising mission is not regretted. The civilising mission is viewed through the superstructure's representation of the events as a necessary means to the injection of progress to the Dark Continent. This acceptance moves Linda to wishing that the same policy of salvation, i.e. the true teachings of Christianity, was implemented in the treatment of the African American

¹⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents* 82.

¹⁷ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

population in America. In doing this, the category of those demonised is broadened to include the straying Christian slaveholders, who have warped the Scriptures to justify oppression.

At the same time, it is disquieting because the missionary project per se was not contested. Brent challenges the brutalisation of the African American community as if they were no different from the African natives. Emphasis is placed on the humanisation that the black community underwent in their conversion to Christianity. Therefore, the black community was wronged by the whites' failure to differentiate. Even as he condemns their actions, Douglass insists on his right to the mainstream by outlining a difference between the African community in America and the natives in Africa in a manner similar to Linda. Instead of debunking the theory that the African population were the descendents of the Biblical Ham and Canaan, Douglass questions the suffering of his people as misplaced guilt because of the mixed population that has sprung forth through the racial intermingling. Even though this is regarded as miscegenation, the mulattos were a fact that cannot be sidelined. Even though they carry the stigma of being illegitimate children in most cases, they were also the unmistakable link that connected the two races. Thus, he avoids questioning the scriptural curse per se by empowering the hybridity that comes from his mid-position. A half African identity was still a fully functional American one. He acquits himself because of his self-professed mixed parentage, but leaves the question of the curse racially charged thereby essentialising it. Terrence E. Cook's study on the processes of assimilation is relevant here:

One case in point would be any assimilation by intermarriage of distinctive races, which some say would in the long run make skin colors

no longer a badge of difference. Although some, such as Alexander the Great, may have sought to unify his empire through intermarriages, I know of no one who had a self-conscious plan to eradicate differences of skin color. Most ardent assimilationists have focused on making their subjects similar in religion, political ideology, language, mode of dress, and so on.¹⁸

In both the slave narratives examined in this chapter, the union between a black and a white individual is defined as miscegenation, and was believed by the white community to render their race impure. Their superiority had to be maintained because the alternative was the degenerate state in which the blacks were found in Africa. Interaction did not equate with intermingling. Instances of miscegenation was undesirable and turned a blind eye to by the white community. It was regarded with shame by the blacks because it signified the sexual abuse of its women. The existence of the mulatto population tended to be withheld from the romanticised antebellum records. The difference in progress between the two civilisations legitimised European presence on African soil and its offer of progress to the natives which also included their relocation to other parts of the world. The slave narrators limited their objection to the use of fetters. Their critique was selective because they chose to ignore the coercion that was present in the changes the natives had to accommodate in “religion, political ideology, language, mode of dress and so on.”¹⁹ This was because it was imperative to depict the black community as unresentful. The portrayal shifted from the indignant black individual to one who was willing to see

¹⁸ Cook, Terrence E. “Assimilations as Controls: Strategies of the Stronger Ethnic Group”. *Separation, Assimilation, or Accommodation: Contrasting Ethnic Minority Policies*. Connecticut: Praeger, 2003. 63.

¹⁹ Cook, *Separation, Assimilation, or Accommodation* 63.

sense and recognise the positive influence of the white missionary man. This was the prototype black individual who was ready to step out from under the yoke and continue with life in America. Such a model of the black self would not appear threatening to the white community, and was best-suited to the task of vocalising the idea of freedom.

Christianity and the root

The erasure of the black community's religious practices and the manner of teaching of the Scripture took place simultaneously. Linda notes that the clergymen's preaching was understood to be the word of the Lord because the slave community's illiteracy required the white man's mediation. Alternatively, the 'White Man's Burden' required him to introduce the Christian God to the unbelieving natives and interpret the Scriptures for them. In some cases, his role as a missionary led him to impose his faith on those who resisted because it was in line with divine orders. Thus, lines like "If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master"²⁰ were meant to inculcate psychological imprisonment since physical might alone was not enough to prevent slave insurrections. Slaves were taught to be obedient members of the church, where every white household took on missionary status. The structure replicated the divine hierarchy with their own set of enslaved followers and the white patriarch as the Shepherd. Disobeying the white slave master was tantamount to inviting divine wrath. Linda and Douglass sought to tackle the religious justifications forwarded by proslavery supporters through a radical appropriation of the Scripture. This required subjecting the Scriptures to a humanist rereading to argue for their cause.

²⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents* 77.

Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* argues that the first step towards the black renaissance was literacy. Thus, in Chapter Six, his education by Mrs Auld was opposed by her husband who argues that “[l]earning would spoil the best nigger in the world ... It would forever unfit [sic] him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As for himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.”²¹ In their struggle for liberation, literacy allowed them access to the Scriptures. The Bible was then used to collaborate with their faculty for rationality to justify their actions, where it will not be presumptuous to argue for a fuller set of rights as per their entitlement as enlightened worshippers of the same God. Douglass recalls the mysterious workings of the Lord in his favour, and aligns his cause as one sanctioned by God Himself. Thus, rebellion against the white patriarch, who was the earthly substitute for the divine head of the church, was presented in such a way by the black narrator that it was agreed to as necessary by the religious white sympathiser.

As a narrative that tries to highlight the commonalities between the black slaves and their white masters, the storyline is replete with scenes of cultural assault. For instance, Douglass’s attribution of his good fortunes to the Christian God involves the rejection of a root that claimed a similar sort of potency. Douglass states from the very beginning in Chapter Five that “in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise.”²² In Chapter Ten, Sandy Jenkins, a slave in his acquaintance offers him a root

²¹ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

²² Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

that wards off white men's attempts to injure him. Douglass accepts it with a view to please his well-wisher rather than with any sense of conviction about the root itself. In his next interaction with Mr Covey, he is treated with kindness. Douglass states that "had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root".²³ He leaves no scope to affirm the workings of the root in his rationalising of his good fortunes. He wilfully affirms his faith in the Christian God despite having the root on his person. The power of the root is tested only with the purpose of proving it to be false. Thus, on Monday, "the virtue of the root was fully tested" when Mr Covey attacks him from behind; "at this – from whence came the spirit I don't know – I resolved to fight It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom."²⁴ The decidedly Christian nature of his resistance is evoked through the image of the Holy Spirit. He implies that he was inspired by God to fight back against his white master. Thus, Douglass's subscription to God makes resistance acceptable as it was sanctioned by divine will. Meanwhile, his approach to the root is backwards where he has already formulated a thesis statement and a desired result. The rest of the narrative is constructed so as to bridge the gap between the two.

Douglass systematically rejects the talisman by subjecting it to a process of empirical observation in a scene that had the potential of affirming the cultural practices of Africa. This is, however, not a blanket approach forwarded to all forms of beliefs that he comes across in the narrative. Christianity, by contrast, is accepted on blind faith and the narrator goes to the extent of attributing his good fortune as the favour by divinity to blaze a trail to freedom through personal struggle. Thus, resistance is differentiated from

²³ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

²⁴ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

insubordination. As a community their effort was to seek freedom from the unfair means by which the white masters controlled them. In this regard the slave narrative resembled texts like *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (1678) penned by John Bunyan (1628–1688), a Puritan where he records the struggle with vices at the end of which the protagonist emerges morally victorious. *The Pilgrim's Progress* traces the journey of an everyman character named Christian, who travels from his hometown, the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. It is an allegorical representation of every individual's transition from this world to Heaven. The slave narrative follows a similar plot and achieves a similar standing as the puritanical text. The slave narrative too was modelled on biblical stories, and recorded struggles with the vices in the form of one's diabolical white enslaver and ends with the eventual scene of freedom as the reward for one's faithfulness. Refuting the arguments forwarded by the black writers would put the proslavery supporters in a position where they would appear to be contradicting their belief in God while generating animosity from the white Christian reader who saw the logic in the slave narrator's arguments. Fanon states that "Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world ... [those] who want to be white will be whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is."²⁵ The mastery of standard and grammatical English becomes a mark of whiteness because it elevates the black writer from the stereotypical image of his mental incapacity.

The deliberate acculturation in the ways of the whites made it difficult for a conscious salvaging of the disappearing heritage of the land left behind by their ancestors. The root offered to Douglass was a remnant of the endangered fetish religious practice in Africa.

²⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 36-38.

The comfort of being able to practise one's own rituals and the solace of connecting with the spirits of one's forefathers are not acts that he sympathises with in his logical refutation of its power. The fact that it fails to produce results in its first trial exposes it to be the false god that he instinctively knew it to be. Compared to this is the years of testing Christianity could have been subjected to, and the number of times it would have 'failed' him during Douglass's years in slavery. The fortitude with which he bides his time in slavery is essentially a Christian precept. The Christianity that was administered to them in a tactical effort to erase the group's historical self is used by the black self to preach in favour of their humanity. This contributes to a pronounced identity where being Christian equates with being American. This also explains why there can be no similar examination of the veracity of the Christian faith because the narrator aimed to bridge the gaps by foregrounding their commonalities. This becomes the central basis on which Douglass's will to power can be substantiated.

Thus, it is interesting that the root's faithful service to Sandy Jenkins stands in sharp contrast to its inability to protect Douglass because of the context in which he was writing. The format of the slave narrative as political writing required him to create an overtly Christian identity. This meant that his slave narrative must not be the story of the black man rediscovering the ways of his ancestors. It may also explain why Jenkins does not have a manuscript of his own as well. Such a recovery of the African historical and cultural self by the African American in America would be tantamount to the damnation of 'going native'. Although the European coloniser feared being desecrated by the contact with the natives, the paranoia and possibility of the choice by the 'civilised' native/slave to return to the African ways was higher. It was also more 'natural' given that it was their forefather's way of life they were returning to. Viewed in this light,

Douglass's refutation of the root and his attempt to hail the Christian God needed to take place at the expense of the African gods.

Chapter Ten is also a turning point in the narrative where he states that "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."²⁶ It becomes very important for Douglass to initiate his rite of passage to the mainstream by ennobling himself through the instruments employed by the white community to insist on its superiority. By doing this he questions the claims of the Western man about these qualities being race- and culture-specific.

The black community as an alternate model

While the white community ran along patriarchal lines, the levelling of the black woman and the man in their common devaluation has the potential of creating an alternative standard. The black community were better situated for a critique of the flaws of the white community because their distance allowed them objectivity. As a separate group that was yet to merge into the macrocosm, the blacks had the space to reformulate themselves through a different framework once they were liberated. A critical examination of the institution of slavery will reveal that the patriarchal white society was at the crux of the disadvantages suffered by the blacks. This gave the latter the option of remaking itself with equality between the sexes as the black way of life. This was because true freedom for a community is conceived of as a collective enterprise that will address oppression at all levels.

²⁶ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

Thus, Linda Brent in *Incidents* states that “in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.”²⁷ The restrictions and injustices that attend a life of slavery would require one to adopt a different yardstick that is sensitised to the degradation and double standards that the victim has been subjected to. An uncritical application of white standards on an atypical life will yield distorted results that fail to reflect the reality of slave life. Furthermore, a verbatim replication of white discourses will be an enforcement of the oppressor’s idea of an acceptable code. Linda challenges the essentialisation that is implied by upholding the Western codes as the absolute. However, Linda leaves it to the white reader to ascertain what the revised code should be. By doing this, she hands the radical elements of her story over for approval to the predominantly white readership. This shows that even as she critiques the white community through her experience of exclusion, she is still caught in its web, and remains at the mercy of her audience where their support is integral to gaining emancipation. The reader represents the majority viewpoint and must be appeased and coaxed to some extent for her to be regarded positively given the suspicion with which her narrative will be approached. Thus, the slave narrative also records the demise of authorial intent. The forces of the market determine what can be written and how events are presented since the black community is still dependent on the passing of white legislation.

A similar proposal for a revision in the standards can also be forwarded for a re-examination of what it is to be a black man. In both the slave narratives, the sex of the narrator determines the manner in which they write and restructure their lives and psyches. Douglass enrolls himself in a vigorous training process where he pursues and

²⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents* 62.

conforms to Western models of masculinity. Linda does not contemplate escaping to the Free States despite her licentious master. Struggling against his lust allows her to remain within the purview of feminine conduct despite the damage it does to her integrity and her public image. Instead, it forces her to accept the attentions of another white man who offers her the same degradation that Dr Flint does. The only difference is that this is someone of her own choosing. Although she is capable of much more, her actions are feminised. She does not consider running away to the North like the men in her family. Inaction becomes integral to her identity compared to any agency she may recover through resistance, which is a key male attribute. Thus, successful masculinity is affirmed through action, which is what Douglass actively engages in. It explains the doing away with feminine emotions like sentimentality, fear or resignation, or the oscillation between hope and despair which a typical slave life could be said to experience. Also, no mention is made of the woman he finally marries once he is free. This makes his narrative appear as a limited portrait of his life in slavery so as to not undermine the seriousness of his concern. The inclusion of content like love or emotionality would seem frivolous and could take away from the stoical image that he builds of himself because it suggests effeminacy by introducing a sensitive side to his militant personality. This charge returns the black man to the coloniser's characterisation of Eastern men as soft, childish and degenerate. This would categorise him as a 'boy' instead of a 'man', which would require him to display mental and physical forte.

The representation of the black man needs to conform to a stock character in order for his heroism to be recognised. Linda subscribes to the same criteria as Douglass when she portrays the men in her family as steadfast adherents of righteous conduct for it is integral to their identity as 'men'. Linda's Uncle Benjamin pursues freedom until he is successful

despite the many trials that he and his family are subjected to by his master. Although regret is expressed because of what this does to the family, straying from the narrow path of Western ideals of attractive masculinity is inconceivable. Therefore, in their effort to struggle to become a 'man', the black male is supported by the women in his family. The release from the maternal bower was often a first step to the individualism that was necessary for a black man to begin his pursuit of freedom. The separation from the family entailed separation from the mother and identification with the father's authority. This realignment was difficult because most slave children tended to be reared by a maternal figure with the father usually out of the picture since the blacks were not allowed to replicate the middle class white family formation. Finding an attractive male subject to emulate was juxtaposed with the mother often urging for passivity and patience to the cruelty. This became one of the crucial milestones towards radicalisation for the black man. It enjoined the rejection of the black mother and the emulation of the white patriarch by breaking up the black family unit a second time by the black 'boy' on his way to be a 'man'.

Continued contestation became a rite of passage to manhood since their positioning as boys, as opposed to men, was a strategic labelling intended to effeminise the male population by conceptualising them through a lack. While the women may engage in covert acts, the men's subversion was more pronounced with the added danger of falling into the trap of compulsive self-vigilance where they are always trying to follow the path of active resistance, and suffering the retributive lash of the slaveholder. Thus, in Chapter Ten, Douglass states that during his stay in Mr. Freeland's custody, he tried to mobilise his fellow slaves: "I talked to them of our want of manhood, if we submitted to our

enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free.”²⁸ Planning and organising kept the slaves alive at the mental level by warding off the passivity that attends resignation.

Since whiteness was the normative, the black individual was involved in counter productions where they are more virtuous, more masculine and more attuned to the codes of Christian conduct. Linda’s brother is forced into deceit by his white master such as “rubbing up pennies with quicksilver, and passing them off for quarters of a dollar on an old man who kept a fruit stall.”²⁹ Even as William disapproves of the act, the liberated space is imperative for him to try to be moral especially if it challenged his master. The brutalisation by the lash wards off a direct challenge from a black witness, where “[William says that] he did not mind the smart of the whip, but he did not like the *idea* of being whipped.”³⁰ [author’s italics] This is because the right of the master to whip his slave cannot be contested in any legitimised space. Such a situation makes one all the more aware of one’s helpless reduction to a dehumanised state.

The two women in Dr Flint’s life

The slave narratives are partly autobiographical, but no attempts are made by the black narrator or the author to claim exemplary status because tentativeness pervades the narrative. At the same time, Linda occupies a ‘case study’ status in *Incidents* because she can only refer to her own experience in slavery to substantiate her claim. Her story also becomes an example in the larger context of the literature that was produced as part of the anti-slavery campaign. Furthermore, Jacobs risks being stamped the creation of a white abolitionist, a process whereby she becomes less and less real, with her fiction having

²⁸ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

²⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents* 21.

³⁰ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

more weight than her real life. This was because the coherence of the narrative and the rationality displayed tend to make the public suspect that a narrative that is so well-managed can only be the work of a white fiction-writer. When Jacobs considers enlisting Harriet Beecher Stowe as an amanuensis, Stowe's decision to use Jacobs' letter detailing her sexual victimisation without her permission is disturbing. Stowe's actions reveals the need to argue for one's text to press for authenticity given the counterclaims by proslavery writers that discredit the slave narrative as sentimental literature based on melodrama and falsehood. This also has implications in the nexus between black and white women where the privileged white woman does not identify with the black woman's plight. Thus, Jacobs truly does become a case in point to substantiate Stowe's claim while the former loses the authorial right to tell her own story. This allows the white woman to be more vocal about the oppression while Jacobs needs her manuscript to be edited by L. Maria Child and Douglass needs his story to be validated as authentic by William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) and Wendell Phillips (1811–1884) who were white men. The primary cry of foul play in the Southern setup of the institution of slavery emerges from the corner ascribed to the white wife in her protest against her husband's tendency to prey on the female slaves. Linda states that "[Mrs Flint] felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted ... I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred".³¹ Although both women are victimised by Dr Flint's infidelity, the struggle between husband and wife trapped in a dysfunctional marriage is displaced and enacted on the dispossessed body of Linda Brent.

The oppression of the Black woman formed the backbone of the socio-economic life in the antebellum South, and was directly connected to the wellbeing of those benefiting

³¹ Jacobs, *Incidents* 37.

from this setup. The dehumanisation of the Black woman in her limited role as the breeder, the field-labourer and the mammy enters a dialectical relationship with the white woman as the child bearer, the housekeeper and the nurturer. This exhibits how different forms of the same discourse of patriarchy are used to maintain the status quo between white men and white women, and between black women and white women. The difference in treatment that is meted out to Linda and Mrs Flint is apparent in the way the former's sexual victimisation by Dr Flint is juxtaposed with his wife's disquiet toleration of the proceedings. Although silently resisted, Linda's degradation garners some form of reaction from the community, whether it is sympathy or condemnation. Her grandmother refers to her connections with the white families in the neighbourhood in an attempt to repel Dr Flint's advances. Meanwhile, the injustice against Mrs Flint remains hidden from the public in order to maintain her status as the angel in the house who must be neither seen nor heard. The infidelity and oppression of the white man questions the capacity of the white household, the basic unit in Western civilisation, to uphold the white family as the ideal that Other communities must arrive at.

A contrapuntal study of Mrs Flint's role would reveal that her hysteria was allied to and probably mirrored that experienced by the black woman. However, Mrs Flint is only mentioned in passing because she possesses a nonsexual identity, and therefore, cannot be sexually jealous. On the other hand, the situation of the slave girl was downplayed in an attempt to redirect the focus of the narrative towards a constructive engagement with the issues therein instead of offering a purview into the latter's emotional turmoil. This is because depicting this side of her experience had the potential to characterise her as part of the irrationality and impenetrability of the African jungle that justified the repressive aspects of a humanitarian effort, that is, the institution of slavery.

Mrs Flint's valorisation as the helpmeet to the white Adam forms part of the discourse to coax her collaboration in the systematic oppression of the black race. As a part-time accomplice, she is distanced from the victim position of the slave woman. Mrs Flint takes on the role of the antagonist in what would be a subplot in the narrative. Linda describes how Mrs Flint behaves as a tyrant in domestic affairs if the cook failed to serve meals at the appointed times. Mrs Flint would "spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meagre fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings."³² Thus, it is ironic that she forms the touchstone, the fundamental component by which colonisation was strategised, by gauging the advancement of a society through an examination of the position of its women. This is then used to justify the domination of the black community given its devaluation of its women. Mrs Flint's presentation in the text proves her to be less than exemplary in conduct.

Leila Ahmed defines the racist ideology behind anthropological studies as the positioning of "Victorian womanhood and mores with respect to women, along with other aspects of society at the colonial center, [which] were regarded as the ideal and measure of civilization. Such theories of the superiority of Europe, legitimizing its domination of other societies, were shortly corroborated by "evidence" gathered in those societies by missionaries and others, whose observations came to form the emergent study of anthropology."³³ The women of the East were collapsed into the monolithic image of voiceless and passive women who were objectified by their men and made to perform subservient and secondary roles. These studies by Western scholars assume the authority

³² Jacobs, *Incidents* 15.

³³ Ahmed, Leila. "The Discourse of the Veil". *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Michigan: BookCrafters, Inc., 1992.

to dissect the intimate life of the Other family and community to which they had limited or no access to, and thereby, commit epistemological violence by enforcing a hostile outsider's definition on it according to their solipsistic comprehension of Africa.

From his limited perspective as an outsider with no possible entry point into their personal lives, the coloniser is guilty of forcefully imposing his interpretation on what he half witnesses and little understands. The story of the African American woman writing back to put the record straight is a radical move as she overrides racial as well as patriarchal codes in this act. The undermining of the Other patriarchy may seem another victory for the colonial presence because of the imperialist's tendency to regard themselves as liberating Other women from the repression of their men. These accounts provided further evidence of their magnanimity as recognised by those natives who have internalised the Western codes of civilisation.

The question of rehabilitation

For those displaced by the colonial contact, integration with the mainstream was understood to be crucial to acceptance. Since the whites were the dominant group when it came to controlling the resources, it was felt that assimilation was the only way in which this could be done. It was also the result of the absence of any other framework to fall back on that could adequately express the black sensibility. Given the years of being told that the slaves were different from their white masters, they too started to believe that human worth could be gained by imitating those who claimed that they possessed it. The Western model needed to be emulated to prove one's humanity. The blacks were still in the initial phase of organising themselves, and so there was no strong sense of community although there was a sense of their belonging to a common race due to their

subjugation. Distrust of other blacks was high as a result because there still existed blacks collaborators who were willing to betray their own race for personal gains. Thus, in the two slave narratives I have examined in this chapter, there is a steady radicalisation of the narrator which is a solitary act of enterprise. The written document in itself was proof that the black self was capable of creating a coherent text, and stood as a counter-narrative to the pseudo-anthropological documents produced by the white intelligentsia.

Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* emulates patriarchal notions of manhood to construct a persona that never tires of the enterprising spirit despite the series of setbacks that his plan to liberate himself suffers. He holds the position of the instigator and coordinator, which gives him mythic dimension that replicates the respect commanded by Prophet Nathaniel “Nat” Turner (1800–1831). Turner’s mobilisation of his fellow slaves created shockwaves in the slave-holding communities in America, and set an example of the valour required to achieve freedom. Furthermore, counter-evidence was produced by empirical studies in anthropology. For instance, Lloyd Garrison, a white abolitionist, journalist and social reformer, states in the “Preface” to Douglass’s narrative that:

An American sailor, who was cast away on the shore of Africa, where he was kept in slavery for three years, was, at the expiration of that period, found to be imbruted and stultified – he had lost all reasoning power; and having forgotten his native language, could only utter some savage

gibberish between Arabic and English, which nobody could understand, and which even he himself found difficulty in pronouncing.³⁴

Slave narratives come under the earliest attempts at revisionist historiography. They are significant because this genre came into existence when the group had the least power to represent itself or challenge the dominant representation. It is as Wendell Phillips, Esq., an American abolitionist, orator and lawyer, states in his forwarding letter to Douglass's narrative about the underclass writing back: "You remember the old fable of "The Man and the Lion", where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented "when the lions wrote history." I am glad the time has come when the "lions write history.""³⁵ However, there is a stark difference between the sort of liberation required by the lion for an uninhibited representation of itself and the space in which the slave narratives were being published. This is because provisions were made for the dispossessed's recording of itself by the superstructure itself. The publication of slave narratives depended on the interest taken in them by white publishers and white abolitionists who rallied around the black writers to ensure that their cause got visibility.

The narratives were motivated by writing back to challenge the ideology of white supremacy. Yet, the texts are replete with evidences of attempts at balancing between recording the truth of what happened and being on the guard against ruffling too many white feathers. The residue is a sensitised narrative premised on a voyeuristic gaze into selective portions of the underbelly of what racial supremacy entails. The endeavour was self-affirmative yet a respectful study of the forces that sustained and glorified the

³⁴ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

³⁵ Douglass, *Narrative* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23/pg23.txt>>

antebellum South. The narrative voice is indignant but not belligerent. At the same time, the power of slave narratives resided in their ability to question and discredit the powerful Western cultural discourses that justified slavery with arguments from within Western cultural and religious discourses. These narratives leave much to the imagination because there are gaps and silences that have intentionally been left there. Slave narratives do not tell the whole story of the black self coming into consciousness because it is not about the black community as much as it is for the consumption of the white audience. Thus, it can be stated that the facts are presented in a way that would be intelligible to the readers.

The native's victimization consists in the fact that the active evidence – the original witness – of her victimization may no longer exist in any intelligible, coherent shape. ... it is the [oppressed]'s silence which is the most important clue to her displacement. That silence is at once the *evidence* of imperialist oppression (the naked body, the defiled image) and what, in the absence of the original witness to that oppression, must act in its place by *performing* or *feigning* as the pre-imperialist gaze.³⁶ [author's italics]

It is not possible for the slave narrator to point to the ways in which they have been oppressed as slaves because there is little or no trace of the native's existence before the moment of contact. In fact, the subject becomes a 'native' with the entrance of the coloniser, and the latter's need to distinguish. Hence, the 'civilised native' is one that both the coloniser and the native have produced in complicity. However, the coercion that this involves cannot be completely proved because of the imperialist's need to

³⁶ Chow, Rey. "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" *Displacement: Cultural Identities in Question*. Ed. Angelika Bammer. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. p. 134.

maintain the silence as well as the writer's need to self-censor. While writing about the self is a highly political act, their position is also volatile because they are only a handful that receive sanction to be published. These writers together form a different subgroup of black people because they are privileged with literacy and a political voice that comes with their being regarded different from the general brutalised stock. For these natives, talking about their position also entails a degree of performance because they are no longer representative of the typical black slave with fewer opportunities to improve their faculties. This also reflects on the ability of the writer to faithfully represent him/herself and sometimes this may distort their portrayal because they need to prove that they are not really the way they have been understood to be. This requires a certain degree of whitewashing of the self. Also, since the slave narrative was meant to be a political move by the black author, the need to be wary about a white backlash, and therefore, the need to be discreet with evidence shows that a degree of distortion was introduced into the texts by the writers themselves.

One area in the stories that was particularly noticeable is the absence or the omission of the feeling of alienation that holds centre stage in any text of the Diaspora. The policies of assimilation engineered whatever acquiescence could be exacted to perpetrate slavery through religious and cultural prescriptions. Failure on the black slave's part to recognise the Bible as Truth was tantamount to damnation, and further proved their regression and justified the framework of slavery. Expulsion from both the black and white community would logically follow as a punitive measure. This already justified the low status that the blacks commanded in America. The worship of a different faith risked dismantling the bridge that the blacks were trying to construct in their claim to membership in the mainstream. The longing for the home left behind by their ancestors is absent with no

scenes of nostalgia depicting knowledge of the African rituals or the social and cultural life. The bitter experience of slavery in the two slave narratives showcase a deliberate attempt to exclude the slave from the normative, middle-class life lived by the master class. The discourses used to substantiate slavery are exposed as instruments of deprivation tackled through a re-reading of the discourses to challenge their non-participation in the mainstream. Thus, these two slave narratives exhibit a very strong sense of being American to argue for their release from fetters. The African component of their subjectivity is hidden such that the reader finds an American persona within a dark body, which is significantly how Frantz Fanon also names his book 'black skin, white masks'. The subject is very confident about his/her acculturation, and this is the only way in which they want to be identified in the private and public selves that they present in the semi-autobiography that they write. There is no scope for them to doubt their Westernised persona because this is how they have reformulated themselves in order to shed their earlier subject position as the African slave.

Chapter Two

The Implication of the Thirteenth Amendment in the American Constitution

In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution began an era in American history known as the Reconstruction. The period is said to span from 1865 to 1877, and it was meant to unify the North and the South of America with the black community at the centre of the negotiations. An examination of the period will reveal that the assimilation of the freed slaves into American society was difficult. Frederick Douglass, a black abolitionist, visualised that Reconstruction should “put an end to the present anarchical state of things in the late rebellious States, ... [The people] want a reconstruction such as will protect loyal men, black and white, in their persons and property [by] establish[ing] in the South one law, one government, one administration of justice, one condition to exercise of the elective franchise, for men of all races and colors alike.”³⁷ The homogenisation of the American people was believed to create an integrated nation. This required a democratic levelling of its people and the offer of equal opportunities through the discourse of patriotism.

The period I will be looking at in particular in this chapter is that of the Harlem Renaissance, which was also known as the “New Negro Movement” (1920s – 1930s). The central problem that the black community faced during this time was one where it was still in the stage of grasping where it stood vis-à-vis the dominant white culture that it could not partake in entirely. Integration meant a complete immersion in white America, but this came at the cost of the new ‘black’ consciousness that was slowly but

³⁷Douglass, Frederick. “Reconstruction”. *Atlantic Monthly*. 1866. p. 761-765. Accessed on: 15 May, 2012. <http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=modern_english/uvaGenText/tei/DouReco.xml&chunk.id=d3&toc.id=&brand=default>

surely coming into being. I will study the extent to which the 'New Negro' could infiltrate the 'Old Negro' ideology during the postbellum days. To do this, I will look particularly at the cultural productions of the Harlem Renaissance to understand the way in which the black community regarded itself, and how it represented itself for the first time in American history without the mediation of a white publisher or apologist.

Even though the blacks could no longer be coerced, the Jim Crow laws operated the wheels of a different vehicle of oppression. Thus, the abolition failed to bring an end to the politics of differentiation. However, the sense of being overcome could not be resisted because of the disorientation the community continued to suffer as a result of its presence in a land that they were made to feel did not belong to them. W.E.B. Du Bois's (1868–1963) theory of double consciousness questioned the appropriateness of the black presence in America. Du Bois asks himself and his black brethren "How does it feel to be a problem?"³⁸ Du Bois explains in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that the black community lived in a state of contradiction: the black individual's reality was mediated through the white individual's interpretation of events and their significance. This was further complicated by the white individual's regard of his/her black counterpart as an outsider. This alienated the black subject because s/he begins to see his/her world as a place that "yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world".³⁹ The black self's continuing presence in America becomes arbitrary compared to the strong sense of belonging with which the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) community could claim the land and a wholly American identity. There was no contradiction in America's position as part of the New World and

³⁸ Du Bois, W.E.B. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings". *The Souls of Black Folk*. Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008. P 11.

³⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 12.

its place in the WASP community's imagination as their homeland. Thus, Du Bois describes the black subject as existing in a state of "twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body".⁴⁰ In this context, 'Americanness' and 'blackness' become mutually exclusive categories. This encloses the black individual in a struggle between what s/he 'is' and what s/he wants to 'be', for s/he 'is' perceived to be 'un-American' or more 'African' than 'American'.

In order to avoid the psychic death that attends social isolation, economic deprivation and national non-recognition, the subject seeks emergence through participation in the intellectual sphere. This was made possible since a significant number of black individuals attended university and went on to become professionals. However, it still depended on the black artist to voice the concerns of that age by producing socially committed literature. It fell on his/her shoulder to cultivate icons that the black community could look to with conviction because emulating to Anglo-American examples further alienated them from themselves because their own reality was not being reflected in the white mainstream.

The 'New Negro' Movement

The iconoclastic image of the 'New Negro' was catapulted by the time itself. It had the purpose of refuting the Jim Crow laws at a time when African Americans had virtually no political recourse. The only arena where they were able to negotiate some visibility for themselves was through their distinctive music, poetry and art. This creative effort had the radical purpose of claiming the African American's civil rights by producing positive

⁴⁰ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 12.

images and promoting activism through art. Thus, Rudolph Fisher's (1897-1934) "Miss Cynthie" (1923) is a story infused with hope and vitality. Harlem is viewed through the eyes of seventy-year old Miss Cynthie on her first trip outside the South with the aim of visiting her grandson. When her grandson reveals his vocation to her through his performance on the stage, her initial disappointed reaction is to regard him and the audience alike as sinners, "turned tool of the devil, disciple of lust, unholy prince among sinners."⁴¹ As David starts tapping and singing the song that she used to sing to him, she recalls the joy she had experienced in music and imbibed in her grandson. The conservatism of the church is set aside for a re-examination of the carnivalesque that the theatre represents. Miss Cynthie's bourgeois aspirations for David as one who serves people as a doctor, a priest or an undertaker is replaced by his confirmed position at the core of the Harlem Renaissance as a successful performer with the potential to make it into mainstream Broadway. He is Harlem's neo-priest, administering to the souls of its black audience come to find relief after a day of toil. Thus, along with other black artists, Fisher formed the crux of black aspirations, who, like David, sought to express black cultural life that was in the making. In some cases, their success took them beyond the racial border of Harlem to give them relevance in the white community. This was, however, a far cry from the sought acceptance because this tendency commodified the Other culture for the consumption of the macrocosm.

The search for an identity for the black community remained a concern because the old assumptions about them as the Other weighed on the interaction between the two communities. In *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow* (1937) by Richard Wright (1908-1960),

⁴¹Fisher, Rudolph. "Miss Cynthie". *The City of Refuge: The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher*. Ed. John McCluskey, Jr. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2008.

the narrator is forced to resign from his first job because he cannot fight against white politics. His family advises him never to challenge white authority, to beware of the limits of social decorum. Thus, the family unit loses some of its radicalism compared to its courage in Chapter One where it was willing to suffer loss when black militant masculinity needed to be supported. Instead, the family rallies around the black subject and urges him to refrain from fighting even if it entails his/her acceptance to being treated as a non-person. This ensures the domestic peace that comes with the knowledge that complacency means that they will not be regarded as a threat. Disparity maintained by the white community festers discontent and urges contestation as well as appeasement. When the narrator is challenged by his superiors for his lack of deference through which they become social equals, he desperately tries to find loopholes in the unwritten regulations – “If I said: No, sir, Mr. Pease, I never called you Pease, I would have been automatically calling Morrie a liar. And if I had said: Yes, sir, Mr. Pease, I called you Pease, I would have been pleading guilty to having uttered the worst insult that a Negro can utter to a southern white man.”⁴² The scene pinpoints anxieties about the black aspirant working his way up the American social ladder through a meritorious system that rewarded hard work. It was believed that their ability to command resources, and therefore, their presence in the macrocosm released anarchic activities which segregation sought to control to some extent. Also, the erasure of difference that was maintained by their exclusion from white privileges results in fears that the black subject was encroaching on their prerogatives. Their participation in the capitalist framework is made

⁴² Wright, Richard. *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, An Autobiographical Sketch*. New York: The Viking Press, 1937. *New Deal Network*. Accessed on: 18 May, 2012. <<http://newdeal.feri.org/fwp/fwp03.htm>>

difficult by the white co-workers who create the confrontation; meanwhile, the narrator comes to a gradual understanding of his oppression and becomes passive. Playing by the 'rag to riches' rules that encourages hard work and sincerity does not work in his favour because upward mobility entails affirming white definitions of success and prosperity; participating in the forces of the market is meant to grant them a place in the superstructure. Thus, the American Dream houses an inherent contradiction for the black community with the ground reality clashing with the official narratives.

The question of creating a black society that was attuned to the specificities of its members' lives which I proposed as a possibility in Chapter One becomes relevant here. Any alternative space where minorities may find contentment within the system of segregation remained impossible as resources continued to be controlled by the white community. The black man's employment threatens to supplant the white supervisor in the workplace with the crack in the glass ceiling. True emancipation could take place only if there was a radical remaking of the framework that recognised the injustices dealt to the African community, and insisted on reparation by doing away with all barriers to participation. However, the system continued to ensure white exclusivity. Despite this, the Harlem Renaissance was a period of high confidence for the black community and the emergence of the black self from its rock-bottom state.

Even as affirmation was sought, segregation limited the ways in which one may profit from it. Race remained as a determiner that continued to separate the two communities. Threats to the existing social order released violent 'corrective' action, and the Jim Crow laws protected the mischief makers. It was also a means to reiterate one's position in the nexus between race, gender and social power. Hence, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow"

suggests that blacks may appear complacent only because retribution is curbed – “Lawd, man! Ef it wuzn’t fer them polices ‘n’ them of lynch mobs, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but uproar down here [sic]!”⁴³ Segregation depended on the ability of the State to quell resistance through fear, the threat of violence as well as its occasional unleashing through the outgrowth of armed outfits like the Ku Klux Klan.

The black self does not exist as a full-fledged player on what remained an all-white chessboard. Appreciation cannot be voiced for a good turn by a white man who removes his hat for him inside an elevator because both his hands are occupied. Instead, the black man was “to look at the white man out of the corner of his eye and grin.”⁴⁴ The black subject is reduced to gestures, which are self-censoring muted attempts at articulation. It is a childlike response because even sincere courtesy has the potential of generating friction. It deprives him of the power of speech, and continues the enactment of inferiority. As an unpleasant facet of American history, the black community is pushed to the point where they cease to speak or be seen. The narrator is taught to be wary of becoming an agent of mischief so he is forced to mime an awkward black porter carrying an unmanageable amount of packages about to spill whereby interaction is avoided. His self-effacement comes with coexisting in a society that remained the domain of his/her former master. This reveals the status quo as unchanged where any attempt at a redressal was perceived to be aggression by the black subject

The policy of exclusion encourages survival through subversive activities such that “I learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that dual role which every Negro

⁴³ Wright, *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, An Autobiographical Sketch*
<<http://newdeal.feri.org/fwp/fwp03.htm>>

⁴⁴ Wright, *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, An Autobiographical Sketch*
<<http://newdeal.feri.org/fwp/fwp03.htm>>

must play if he wants to eat and live.”⁴⁵ The conniving black subject that this gives rise to cohere with the image of Sambo whose childlike propensity was to lie to benefit from his white master’s kindness who also felt responsible for him.

The politics behind Sambo

Margaret Mitchell’s depiction of the animal joy emanating from Big Sam’s person in his reunion with Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind* is one of the many patronising representations of the former black slave who remains a faithful idolater of the Old South: “Sam galloped over to the buggy, his eyes rolling with joy and his white teeth flashing, and clutched her outstretched hand with two black hands as big as hams. His watermelon-pink tongue lapped out, his whole body wiggled and his joyful contortions were as ludicrous as the gambolings of a mastiff.”⁴⁶ Big Sam’s Otherness is captured through animal imagery. His faculty to speak takes second place to the unbridled emotion of happiness he experiences on finding his former mistress who he impinges on for his care. The scene confirms the Southern justification of slavery where the former slave too yearns for white paternalism. It becomes a case in point where Big Sam and the Sambo stereotype collapses phonetically and characteristically to become the iconographic image of the New South where blacks are struggling with emancipation. Having explored all that the North can offer and armed with the knowledge gained from the experience of freedom, Big Sam wishes to be returned to his white family. He is the prodigal son, rejecting the new American society that he is ill-prepared for – “Ah done had nuff freedom. Ah wants somebody ter feed me good vittles reg’lar, and tell me whut ter do an’

⁴⁵ Wright, *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, An Autobiographical Sketch*
<<http://newdeal.feri.org/fwp/fwp03.htm>>

⁴⁶ Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. New York: Warner Books, 1993. p.771.

whut not ter do, an' look after me w'en Ah gits sick [sic].”⁴⁷ However, realisation comes too late for him. The Old South is a story of the past, and there can be no return to the plantation because of the demise of former certainties symbolised by his deceased master and mistress at Tara. Despite this, Scarlett shows no hesitation in welcoming him back to Tara because that is his rightful place in America. He needs to be taken off the streets because his prowling is a potential threat to white women, which is something that Scarlett feels responsible for.

Stanley Elkins describes the circulation of Sambo as an infantile psyche that is:

the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behaviour was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childish attachment; it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being. Although the merest hint of Sambo's "manhood" might fill the Southern breast with scorn, the child, "in his place", could be both exasperating and lovable.⁴⁸

This description adheres to the prevailing stereotype of the 'Old Negro', a Sambo-like persona that dogs the unnamed narrator throughout Ralph Ellison's (1914–1994) *Invisible Man* (1952). References to Sambo epitomises the theme of theatricality in the novel, beginning with the narrator's grandfather and ending with the Brotherhood, where he

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* 773.

⁴⁸ Jones, Thomas David. *Human Rights: Group Defamation, Freedom of Expression and the Law of Nations*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1998. Accessed on: 15 July, 2012.
<<http://books.google.com.ph/books?id=Y9x08XxMC5MC&pg=PA107&dq=Sambo+black&hl=en&sa=X&ei=mqC6T9rYH8vJrAedm5H-Bw&ved=0CFsQ6AEWCA#v=onepage&q=Sambo%20black&f=false>>

receives instructions on how to deal with the 'race' question. When the Brotherhood offers him a job with Harlem as his district, the narrator views political action strategised by members of both races as a means to stall his "disintegration"⁴⁹. However, the beginning of his involvement with the Brotherhood raises doubts when his shade of blackness becomes a subject that is quickly hushed because it is inappropriate in the new era of political correctness. It becomes clear that he has been picked based on a certain racial profiling. The refusal to discuss the matter questions the extent to which the organisation is truly free from racial undertones. The choice of a black man is premised on the notion that only a black man can reach out to the black community. Racial identities hold centre stage during political discussions because it is believed that only a black man can adequately engage with black-related issues because they are his own. While only a black man can be the face of the struggle, events reveal him to be a mere figurehead appointed by the white players who still run the show and the organisation.

The Brotherhood defines itself as an organisation that mobilises agitation for those who "have been dispossessed of their heritage."⁵⁰ However, the heterogeneous multitude that it encompasses results in a confused sense of direction even as it garners support through a garbled mission statement that the narrator never comprehends. The Brotherhood renames the already nameless narrator, further perpetrating his unreality. The act robs him of what he already finds increasingly difficult to recall, his name, and therefore, his identity. The act of naming and renaming perpetrates the control of the superstructure because it harks back to the antebellum when slaves were named after their owners. As a marker of identity, these names pointed to the owner of a particular slave. Thus, the name

⁴⁹ Ellison, Ralph Waldo. *Invisible Man*. New York: Penguin Books, 1952. p. 286.

⁵⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 246.

was also a signifier of possession. Neither names of the Invisible Man are disclosed to the reader, suggesting their irrelevance in a context where race is the sole marker of identity. The only two personas available to the narrator are that of Sambo or the 'New Negro' that is newly conceived by the Reconstruction and delivered by the Harlem Renaissance. The 'New Negro' has the potential of collaborating with the Brotherhood. Events reveal the 'New Negro' to be a hoax as well, another rhetoric by which the black subject can believe that things are actually improving with the passage of time. The narrator resists efforts to render him redundant through the distortion of his community as encapsulated in the figurine that he discovers in Mary's house "a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest."⁵¹ He reacts violently to the doll whose description mirrors the way Mitchell characterised Sambo in *Gone with the Wind*, smashing the grotesquely made artefact from old times to affirm his role in the avant-garde, 'New Negro' movement. The endeavour to rise above the insignificance is achieved through his association with the Brotherhood where the Invisible Man declares "I have become *more human* ... Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human, I feel strong, I feel able to get things done!"⁵² 'True' agency comes in his new role as an agent of the Brotherhood, but it is not so much a role that he rises up to as he does in his first speech-making scene. It is a power that is vested in his person through his re-baptism by Jack. The limitations are apparent from the outset in the eviction scene where the end result witnesses the bystanders devolving into a mob, or the race riot that is sparked off by Ras the Destroyer with which the novel ends.

⁵¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 258.

⁵² Ellison, *Invisible Man* 279.

The plot reveals that the Sambo caricature was the inescapable reality of all black men: existing at the level of a stereotype, the black characters are forced to witness the nullification of their aspirations to the point where they are returned to their origin as Sambo since “The traditional Sambo story held [that] blacks had little to aspire to except the sanctions of the slave system that required and sustained infantilism as a normal feature of behaviour.”⁵³ This explains the violence that Clifton’s self-mocking surrender to and peddling of the Sambo doll does to the Invisible Man: “it says something about African-Americans that is not true. It casts aspersions on the humanity of African-Americans and subjects them to public ridicule, contempt, obloquy, shame, and disgrace.”⁵⁴ The term harks on the cultural divide between the two communities coexisting within the same national boundary. The insinuation of difference that it casts keeps them asunder. While assimilation is retarded by segregation, attempts to merge reflect on the social power that each community commands. In this case, the blacks find themselves trying to make a place in white society. This places the dominant group in a commanding position, which it tries to hold on to by allowing selective access. Thus, the narrator becomes a participant in the mindless savagery of the ‘battle royal’ although he was originally invited to deliver a speech that had won him accolades in school. This is an activity that is an exposition of his intellectual moorings and distinguishes him from the other black boys who formed the original cast of the battle royal. Last minute arrangements monolithically lumps them as black performers selected for their entertainment value. In addition, the prioritising of the blindfolded boxing match over the

⁵³ Jones, Thomas David. *Human Rights: Group Defamation, Freedom of Expression and the Law of Nations*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1998. Accessed on: 4 May, 2012.

<<http://books.google.com.ph/books?id=Y9x08XxMC5MC&pg=PA107&dq=Sambo+black&hl=en&sa=X&ei=mqC6T9rYH8vJrAedm5H-Bw&ved=0CFsQ6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=Sambo%20black&f=false>>

⁵⁴ Ibid. 111.

narrator's speech and the interruptions, mockery and racist interjections – “Let me at that big nigger!”⁵⁵ – that accompanies both activities shows that the order is inconsequential because they are relevant only to the extent to which they can cater to white amusement.

Despite the end of slavery, the black individual still had to contend with the implication of being Sambo when s/he tries to present an enlightened front. “The invisible man’s ultimate dilemma [was] that the doll is part of his heritage but one he can neither deny nor accept. To deny it [was] one kind of non-humanity; to accept it [was] another kind of dehumanization.”⁵⁶ Thus, the black self needed to resist becoming straitjacketed by the two extremes, where neither was a holistic portrayal. However, Sambo was never a distant reality whether it took the form of the battle royal or speech-making. As the narrator delivers his speech before his white benefactors, “[w]hen I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it.”⁵⁷ The polysyllabic words enunciated by a mongrel black speaker takes on a comic significance and the white audience watches for slippages. The limelight granted to the protagonist at the beginning of the novel is not dissimilar from the role the Brotherhood offers him. In both instances, the black speaker is approached as a spectacle. Resistance takes on an element of meaninglessness where emancipation only made adjustments in the American Constitution at the level of the legislature; the impact never precipitates to the material and ideological sphere. The only organisation where the black man believed grievances could be redressed turns out to be one where the black man had a voice only because he was lent the platform. Thus, the protagonist finds out that the platform never existed for

⁵⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 22.

⁵⁶ Slatoff, Walter. “Staying Human and Sane in *Invisible Man*”. *Bloom’s Guides: Invisible Man*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008.

⁵⁷ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 29.

him. Whatever self-representation he was allowed came with the sanction of those who head the Brotherhood.

The Sambo doll in Clifton's possession commodifies the archetypal black man. Its purchase reflects the hegemonic forces that still impact the black man's identity. Clifton's appearance as a costumed Sambo functions as a gimmick, drawing attention to a black clown's newfound vocation peddling himself along with the Sambo dolls. The doll is not anachronistic, where its ongoing consumption is marked by the racial prejudice ingrained in American society, such that both the Sambo dolls and Clifton himself can still fascinate a large section of the passersby. Also, the racial affiliations of the crowd that gathers to watch Clifton is unclear, suggesting the indoctrination of the majority of people, their inability to put up a conceptual front to the sustained attack on the black community.

The Sambo doll is not a relic of the past. Its relevance is apparent in the disorientation injected into the novel by Clifton's 'betrayal' of the black cause and the police brutality that results in his meaningless death. The incident forces the narrator to a re-examination of the assumptions that came with his political voice. He discovers that he was only an employee at the Brotherhood; his power came with strings operated by an insidious puppet-master authority. Viewed in this regard, Clifton's embrace of the doll may be a creative intervention that subtly challenges the incongruities of his life. It registers his decision to fall, to "plunge"⁵⁸ from the two extremes of the enlightenment of the Brotherhood and the Sambo, and resist the framework altogether in a true recognition of their status as "[m]en outside of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten ... who

⁵⁸ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 353.

knew but they were saviours, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it.”⁵⁹ His decision and resultant death are public statements elucidating the unreality of the black man’s life and decisions that can be misconstrued and realigned to meet the requirement of any propaganda, whether it is the narrator’s, the Brotherhood’s or Ras the Destroyer’s. The alienation of the black man from his environment is apparent from the disunity and the chaos in his community. The high level of distrust is apparent from the narrator’s initial reception of Clifton as competition where his easy charm makes the Invisible Man conclude “I’ll just have to be careful not to antagonize anyone. As it is, someone might resent my being in charge”⁶⁰; tragedy takes on a comic edge in a riot that happens offstage where Clifton attacks one of the white members of the Brotherhood, identifying him only as a white man, who must, therefore, be an adversary. The difficulty of gauging one’s racial leanings renders political transactions impossible, resulting in an incomprehensive engagement with the status quo with no way to resolve the deadlock and conclude the negotiations in a positive way.

The importance of the intellectual sphere

The political public sphere still remained the domain where the activity of the state could be influenced and contested through committed action and radical writing. Thus, with the Harlem Renaissance, the literary sphere became the spearhead through which reform could once again be debated. Without any scope for political recourse or a public platform where issues could be openly discussed, the black community was incapable of

⁵⁹ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 355.

⁶⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 296.

negotiating for itself in any coherent manner. While the forum was created by the black intelligentsia, the publicity and the ripples caused by the publication of such works like *Invisible Man* allowed it a place in American chronology and the canon.

The partial autonomy of the emancipated blacks resulted in some degree of control over the resources. This created a space where black intellectuals could tackle issues at the public level in a way that would be representative of the black community. The problematisation of areas by the black thinkers equated to their appropriation of the issues pertaining to their lives. They needed to become their own mouthpiece rather than being objectified and being rendered into a 'problem' in American society. The question with which I began this chapter that was posed to the black individual in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* becomes significant in this context. Any response to queries from outside the community would include some degree of defensiveness on the part of the black psyche that was still in gestation. Such questions from without form part of the strategy to destabilise the progress made. This makes it important for the black intelligentsia to be able to discuss issues relevant to the black community. This repossession can only be achieved by embracing oneself, and was believed to be necessary before one could consider becoming a part of the mainstream.

Harlem, the black capital in America

Even as debates were publicly conducted about the manner in which assimilation should happen, attempts were made to examine white interest in the new black phenomenon. For instance, Langston Hughes (1902–1967) in "When the Negro was in Vogue" (1940) examines the fad of white interest in black culture that went contrary to the general trend of the black self trying to become 'white'. The sense of invasion felt by the black

community was superimposed by the white caller's belief that "Negroes loved to have [the whites] there, and ... that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses."⁶¹ The white caller's superior buying power determined the extent to which their interest was encouraged by the black club managers because of the cash inflow it brought to their economy. The flourishing white presence in the black clubs was tantamount to the black performers achieving relevance in the mainstream. This brokered the space for interaction although it took place within a limited milieu. Harlem's star attraction was its black performers, who were an amalgamation of those on the stage and those that made the crowd. It was forgotten that they existed beyond the music and the dance, that they too lived a private life experiencing human hopes and fears as well as a public life of economic impoverishment and racist oppression. .

The visit to Harlem was likened to a momentary submersion. It was a voyage taken to discover the Other in Harlem, a city that became a microcosm of Africa. On the other hand, it was fashionable and added to one's self-worth among the black artists to be able to say that one knew white celebrities. This only served to take the objectification of those who propelled the Harlem Renaissance to new heights. The difference in status amongst black individuals was reflected in their accessibility to the white populace. This was a replay of the hierarchy where the black community of intellectuals became Sambos, vying with each other for the master's company, amusement and approval. Even as the denizens of Harlem were engaged in a rediscovery of their African legacy and

⁶¹ Hughes, Langston. "When the Negro was in Vogue". *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1940. Accessed on: 15 July, 2012.
<<http://www.npenn.org/cms/lib/PA09000087/Centricity/Domain/210/ch%2013/sec%204%20PS%20Hughes.pdf>>

heritage, this led to a shift in the mainstream to make adjustments for the subaltern; the black subject regressed to an object to be dissected under the microscope of the white eye. They became exhibits on display, and were subjected to a museumisation of black culture. This stultified a dynamic flow into snap shots. It reduced a serious process into a spectacle.

Certain hack writers catered to white consumption: “they ceased to write to amuse themselves and began to write to amuse and entertain white people, and in so doing distorted and over-colored their material, and left out a great many things they feared would offend their American brothers of light complexion.”⁶² To these writers art loses its transformative power because of their concern with penetration into the mainstream to gain from access to a larger market. Thus, the decision to pander to white interest had implications on representation politics. Sometimes it entailed leaving out details that they thought would be of no interest to their audience. Consequently, this also meant that the overall portraiture was distorted and incomplete. Thus, to some extent, some black writers contributed to a distorting conceptualisation of themselves. The Enlightenment valorisation of the faculty of the mind required one to engage in visible signs through which the presence of the intellect could be ascertained. The ability of Other peoples to gain mastery in this field indicated that they deserved better than to be treated thus. However, the continued oppression showed that the European Enlightenment ideals of the eighteenth century were limited in their application to the white philosophers’ own communities. Henry Louis Gates Jr. demonstrates the linkages between the Western culture of writing and one’s place in the power play between cultures. Literacy is

⁶² Hughes, *The Big Sea*

<<http://www.npenn.org/cms/lib/PA09000087/Centricity/Domain/210/ch%2013/sec%204%20PS%20Hughes.pdf>>

managed as a “commodity to confine and delimit a culture of color. For literacy ... is the emblem that links racial alienation with economic alienation.”⁶³ Once literacy was mastered by making education available to the freed blacks, the separation between the two communities hinged on the basic cultural and racial differences. This preoccupation with white tastes takes the black writer away from the authenticity of her/his lived experience. The deliberation over what to write becomes a warped elevation of the white audience, and takes the black artist away from her/his community. This was because, as Hughes argued in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), the artist cannot shed her/her black identity. The black artist’s marginal status as a citizen was replicated in the humanities where literary genius was recognised as art if it proceeded from visible allusions to Western canonical standards. The pressure to be wary of deviation is all the more acute, and perpetually keeps the artist proving her/his intellect, humanity and civilisation along decidedly Eurocentric lines for it denotes positive ideals; deviation through difference was antithetical and demonised. Departures risked rejection because they were not produced, interpreted or appraised in a vacuum. The interplay of blackness and whiteness remained in the background even as the black artist addressed the mammoth responsibility of producing black creativity from scratch. This involved mitigating blackness through ill-fitting Western literary devices, which were an inherent part of an Occidental sensibility; meanwhile, the discourse of difference propounded by race documentarians showed a corresponding diametric that took place along the coordinates of one’s literary sensibilities and ideological underpinnings. The creation of

⁶³ Gates, Henry Louis. “Editor’s Introduction: Writing “Race” and the Difference It Makes”. *Critical Inquiry*. 12. 1 (1985). Accessed on: 6 June, 2012.
<<http://npproseminar.pbworks.com/f/Gates,%20Writing%20Race.pdf>>

journals like *Crisis*, *Pittsburg Courier*, *Negro World* etc was integral to the project of self-empowerment, and allowed for uninhibited black expression.

Whilst endeavouring to break from the 'Old Negro' stereotype, the black artist was required to negotiate with the implication of becoming the 'New Negro'. Questions included as to whether the 'New Negro' was a replication of the middle-class America or whether the identity had an African orientation. Even Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* struggles with identity-formation: the continued oppressive power play affects the black pawn in such a way that s/he remains a meek employee in an organisation like the Brotherhood that heralds equal opportunities. Instead, he spends most of his tenure being cornered by other members and accused of pursuing petty ends using the resources of the organisation. The other image of the 'New Negro' is offered through the militant radicalism of Ras the Exhorter who becomes Ras the Destroyer by the end of the novel. While the Brotherhood's vision of togetherness is exposed as rhetoric, Ras, who was distanced as the Other, can also be accused of the same crime. The act of writing to engage in constructive identity formation becomes suspect because it can sometimes just be a means to counter certain ideologies.

The question of the constructed nature of racial ideologies vis-à-vis formulating a black identity

Opposed to the idea of black identity formation was George Samuel Schyuler (1895-1977), a conservative African-American author, journalist and social commentator, who argued against the existence of a "Negro" art for it would be the prerogative of the

nations in Africa. An African American's claim to the ““peculiar” psychology”⁶⁴ that fosters such developments would be far-fetched. The slave's creations were borrowings from the Protestant hymns and the Biblical texts, and are, therefore, integral to a particular group in America. This meant that they were differences in the cultural productions of the black community of America and Africa. He resists the essentialism that came from an insistence on the difference between the two races. This was one of the slogans of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, he insisted in his essay “The Negro-Art Hokum” that “Aside from his color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American. Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same. Because a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican [sic] behaviour, the common notion that the black American is so “different” from his white neighbour has gained wide currency.”⁶⁵

Schyuler insists on the emptiness of race that has been invested with meaning by both the black and the white community, “as a building block around which political and cultural identities are created.”⁶⁶ Despite the constructed-ness of ‘race’, the lived experience of a majority of black people needed a unique voice. The inbuilt paradox of the situation was

⁶⁴ Schyuler, George S. “The Negro-Art Hokum”. *Nation*. 16 June, 1926. P. 662-3. *History Matters*. Accessed on: 13 June, 2012. <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5129/>>

⁶⁵ Schyuler, “The Negro-Art Hokum” <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5129/>>

⁶⁶ Tucker, Jeffrey A. ““Can Science Succeed where the Civil War Failed?” George S. Schyuler and Race”. *Race Consciousness*. Ed. Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker. New York: New York University Press, 1997. Accessed on: 13 June, 2012. <http://books.google.com.bd/books?id=F8_6hr-fy00C&pg=PT264&lpg=PT264&dq=a+fragmented+man+george+schuyler+and+the+claims+of+race&source=bl&ots=3-sTngt9t&sig=xIAx8Bqa0W2zZetqGCQvrOJUdEA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=7A_LT7OoJs7MrQe02oGrDg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=a%20fragmented%20man%20george%20schuyler%20and%20the%20claims%20of%20race&f=false>

that this view carried within it the dangers of self-definition; this further perpetrated the oppression that justified such stereotypes as the Sambo. While the black theorists' work on race was significantly different from the ideologues that motivates the mobilisation of such bodies as the Ku Klux Klan, it is the existence of the latter that dictated the former's response. Since black intellectuals would have the Harlem Renaissance as an important milestone of the recovery of the self in African American historiography, dissenting voices like Schyuler and his adherents are studied as renegades.

This identification of oneself as the intelligentsia in the face of the Sambo role meted out to them involved wrestling with the implications of what it was not only to be an artist, but a black one. This predicated the reconciliation of an African inheritance with an American identity, whilst living in the Diaspora. Langston Hughes responded to Schyuler by examining the subject position of the black self looking upon the white bourgeois American home. Hughes concludes that one's automatic relegation as an outsider produced mimicry because of the inadequacy associated with blackness. The black individual sought to refashion her/himself along Western patterns. Becoming white through the presentation of "a self-styled "high-class" Negro"⁶⁷ was avoidance of the label of the quintessential black self. It was escapism on the part of the colonised black subject to foreground her/his artistic talent at the cost of her/his racial categorisation. This delimited the natural sprawl of her/his personality through the unnatural barriers put in place by the superstructure. According to Hughes, the writer functioned as an ambassador between the two races, vested with the task of representing one group to another. Finally,

⁶⁷ Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". *The Nation*, 1926. Modern American Poetry. Ed. Cary Nelson. Accessed on: 26 May 2012.
<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm>

he outlined in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) that the role of the black artist was “to change through the force of his art that old whispering “I want to be white,” hidden in the aspirations of his people, to “Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful And ugly too”.”⁶⁸ When it came to weaving a plot, the aim of the ‘true’ artist should be to scale the racial mountain by narrating the story in its entirety, to move to an acknowledgement of the plurality of states in which the black self may exist, while recognising the dignity that resides within each. The one thing that s/he must battle with is the desire to write like a white artist. He envisioned the individual’s embrace of her/himself in all aspects to allow for integration and emphasised on the importance of moving beyond the binaries to a blurring of the categories.

It was in this light that the artist’s negotiation with expectations may have a crippling effect. Continued insistence on their victim position rested on sensationalism and detracted from the quality of the writing, and narrowed the range of topics that the black artist could write about. Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) wrote unabashedly about her response to the ‘black arts’ in “How It Feels to be Colored Me” (1928). The narrative traces a black girl’s experience upon discovering herself as part of the black ‘problem’. The narrator insists on moving past “the sobbing school of Negrohood”⁶⁹ because it stalls creativity. Even as Hurston claimed to be free of historical forces, her essay resonates with racial implications. Her black neighbours refuse to take an interest in the white people who pass through. The commodification of her ‘black arts’ comes as a surprise

⁶⁸ Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”.

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm>

⁶⁹ Hurston, Zora Neale. “How It Feels to be Colored Me”. *World Tomorrow*. May, 1928. Accessed on: 4 June, 2012. <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/how.html>>

given that her dance and other antics are not performances exchanged for monetary gain, but sprang from the child's natural flair. She responds with her entire being to the black orchestra as it "grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. [She] follow[s] those heathen, follow them exultingly."⁷⁰ Meanwhile, her white companion remarks dispassionately on the quality of the music. Even as she responds to the black orchestra with a fanatical frenzy, taking her on a trip back to "living in the jungle way"⁷¹, this response to the primeval should not define her. She elaborates that a multiplicity of stances belies definition: "I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads. I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries."⁷² The tendency to essentialise an experience is rejected. She views herself as a medium through whom the Muses can impart great literature.

The woman as a black artist

It is this reluctance to lend oneself to definition that invoked Alain Locke's wrath in his review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) where he belittles her contribution by expecting "social document fiction."⁷³ Locke believed that the yardstick to measure the artist's oeuvre was committed writing. According to this evaluation, Hurston's "How It Feels to be Colored Me" and "Sweat" risk being swept aside as

⁷⁰ Hurston, "How It Feels to be Colored Me". <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/how.html>>

⁷¹ Hurston, "How It Feels to be Colored Me". <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/how.html>>

⁷² Hurston, "How It Feels to be Colored Me". <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/how.html>>

⁷³ Locke, Alain. Rev. of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. *Opportunity*, 1 June, 1938. Accessed on: 5 June, 2012. <<http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam854/summer/hurston.html>>

irrelevant to the 'real' masculine world. In comparison, a short story like "Sweat" (1926) centred on sexual politics and domestic violence. This could be easily swept aside as irrelevant to the serious responsibility that the black male writers felt they were shouldering. In the drive to be 'serious', it was usually the woman's writing that bore the brunt of masculine aggression. Alain Locke writes that "Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives who the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep [sic] over and envy. Having gotten rid of condescension, let us now get over oversimplification [sic]!"⁷⁴ Richard Wright too accuses Hurston of pandering to white tastes where she "*voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh."⁷⁵ [author's italics] The black community viewed an unfavourable explication of the racial reality as betrayal on the writer's part as it exposes them to public ridicule through the actions of one of their own.

Even as black men struggled with the race 'problem', black women had to bear the additional brunt of their gender. Alice Walker's (b.1944) "In Search of Our Mother's Garden: The Creativity of Black Women in the South" (1974) picks up on what Virginia Woolf's (1882–1941) *A Room of One's Own* (1929) had left out. Woolf analysed that the factors that hindered a woman artist was a room of her own and economic independence. To this Walker adds the psychological and physical effects of the institution of slavery – "When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then

⁷⁴ Locke, Alain. Rev. of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. *Opportunity*, 1 June, 1938. Accessed on: 5 June, 2012. <<http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam854/summer/hurston.html>>

⁷⁵ Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears". Rev. of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. *The New Masses*, 5 October, 1937. Accessed on: 6 June, 2012. <<http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam854/summer/hurston.html>>

stuck in a far corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children.”⁷⁶ Black women are overshadowed in the struggles of black men and white women in a world that belonged to white men. Walker identifies her own mother’s garden as the artistry that had been overlooked and understated in her daily life of toil. It was her garden where she “[o]rder[ed] the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, [was] work Black women have done for a very long time.”⁷⁷ In “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism”, Barbara Smith explains that the “Black women’s existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the “real world” of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown.”⁷⁸ Smith adds that the black women movement cannot be subsumed within the white feminist approach to literature. Hurston’s “Sweat” can easily be swept aside as a preview into domestic violence and sexual politics, and therefore, irrelevant to the movement towards a positive self-constructivism. In an act of passive assertion, Delia does not aid her poisoned husband – “Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cool river was creeping up and up to extinguish the eye which must know by now what she

⁷⁶ Walker, Alice. “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South”. *Ms.* Spring 2002. Accessed on: 15 June, 2012. <<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/walker.asp>>

⁷⁷ Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South”. <<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/walker.asp>>

⁷⁸ Smith, Barbara. “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism”. *But Some of Us are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men: Black Women’s Studies*. Ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982. Accessed on: 16 June, 2012. <http://books.google.com.ph/books?id=1Sdj80xO-VgC&pg=PA157&dq=towards+a+black+feminist+criticism&hl=en&sa=X&ei=rS_cT9ifAo2aiAfpsq2tCg&ved=0CEgQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=towards%20a%20black%20feminist%20criticism&f=false>

knew.”⁷⁹ The marginalised woman is finally able to free herself through an inversion of the biblical snake mythology that conspires in her favour. Through one scene of release, she continues to “sweat” to support herself, drawing on her employment by the white households in the face of deep-seated tendencies towards the passivity sanctioned in the way the men of her community discuss her mistreatment by her husband. Scenes of domestic labour may be regarded as irrelevant to questions pertaining to the political aspect of the story. However, Delia’s attempt to order the world is similar to Walker’s proletarian mother in “Sunday night after church, she sorted [the soiled clothes] and put the white things to soak ... A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.”⁸⁰

In a world where black writers can be smothered in a cloak of invisibility like Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, a similar treatment is meted out to the various segments of the black community, especially its women, when it was felt that they were compromising with the position of their people by presenting them as latter day Sambos. Any attempt to arrive at a viable conclusion about the black community is riddled by apprehension. This is best expressed by the quote below:

Black people have up to recently worked along two, by no means mutually exclusive, assumptions: I-must-emulate-my-betters (or, the-larger-culture, or, the-cultured-culture); I-must-protest-my-dehumanization-and-reach-out-to-assert-a-humanity-which-I-know-I-have-within-myself. It is the second assumption which has led us to believe that Black American

⁷⁹ Hurston, Zora Neale. “Sweat”. Accessed on: 17 June, 2012.

<<http://members.multimania.co.uk/shortstories/hurstonsweat.html>>

⁸⁰ Hurston, “Sweat” <<http://members.multimania.co.uk/shortstories/hurstonsweat.html>>

literature has perhaps operated – is operating moreso [sic] than it is – by a different set of standards than the white, but it is the first which has kept us to the same formal tradition, the same categories of genres, the same tools and techniques, to some extent the same schools and movements, as Euro-American literature.⁸¹

The two communities are inextricably linked by history and context. This is apparent from Conrad Kent Rivers' poem "Watts" – "must I shoot the / white man dead / to free the nigger / in his head?"⁸² Even as a 'New Negro' is formulated with resourcefulness, intelligence and heroism as typical traits, it is conjoined with the conception of the 'Old Negro' as well as the counterclaim that there is no such being called the 'Negro' in America. In essence, the 'Negro' was the creation of white America that continued in existence long after it had served its purpose of an Other group so that the socio-economic institution of slavery could be sustained by its perpetrators. This was because the essentialism through animal or childlike imagery led the public to the belief that the black community needed to be kept under the yoke for their own benefit. However, the ability to adapt is a human condition, and the black subject's complete internalisation of European ways meant that they were willing and able to become a part of America at a time when white America was not ready to deal with the fact that they had started the process of assimilation themselves.

⁸¹ Kgositsile, Keorapetse. "Language, Vision and the Black Writer". *Black World*. June 1972. Accessed on: 13 June, 2012.

<http://books.google.com.ph/books?id=47IDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA77&dq=rudolph+fisher+miss+cynthia+analysis&hl=en&sa=X&ei=punUT5yUJIfTrQe718D8Dw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=rudolph%20fisher%20miss%20cynthia%20analysis&f=false>

⁸² Kgositsile, *Black World*

<http://books.google.com.ph/books?id=47IDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA77&dq=rudolph+fisher+miss+cynthia+analysis&hl=en&sa=X&ei=punUT5yUJIfTrQe718D8Dw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=rudolph%20fisher%20miss%20cynthia%20analysis&f=false>

Chapter Three

The choice between life as an immigrant in America and living as an American

Living the Diaspora with a hyphenated existence remains a contradiction that belies efforts to achieve oneness. This made the counterculture revolution in the 1960s an exciting period in American history for Other communities. It featured a trend that questioned what being 'American' entailed by challenging the tendency of a community to create a tradition through a skewed reading of their claim to ancestry. Ideas with regards to assimilation were already doing the rounds with America being termed a "melting pot" for the first time in 1908 in Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*.⁸³ Furthermore, different thinkers considered the implications of the move to America and becoming an American. Thus, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735 – 1813) wrote in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) that the American was one who "leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. ... Here individuals of all nations are *melted* into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."⁸⁴ [author's italics] While there were external markers to gauge assimilation such as how well the subject speaks English, whether they live in segregation or integrated communities etc, it was also important to understand the concept as "a subjective sense of identity: how one conceives of oneself and one's national community"⁸⁵.

⁸³ "Melting pot" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting_pot> Date Accessed: 14 November, 2012.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Glazer, Nathan. "Assimilation Today". *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What it Means to be American*. Tamar Jacoby. New York: Basic Books, 2004. p.73.

The counterculture movement shaped popular culture in a way that impacted the way Americans perceived themselves. Thus, there was more to being American than being white at a time when the American consciousness was taking into account the range of axes through which identity could be assumed. In the previous chapter, I tried to look at the two pervasive identities that the black community grappled with. Even as they were busy formulating the 'New Negro', they were aware that they were working to invalidate the 'Old Negro', and that for the majority of black people involved in the mundane realities of life, the latter reality held true. These were people who could not afford a college education and were caught in the lower rungs of the social strata scraping a meagre livelihood. They had no leisure to access new ways in which the few university-educated blacks were theorising within academic circles. They were contextualised by the locale in which they functioned. The proposal for a hybrid identity involves "reworking rather than just dropping ethnic traditions, and often ... new ethnic practices and traditions [were created] to fit present needs."⁸⁶ For the black self involvement in cultural articulation just meant a stronger realignment along what it means to be an African American in America. This made redirection necessary towards a celebration of hybridity since the negative images still lurked in the background of everything positive that the blacks sought to underscore in their self-representation. By dealing with the implications and the causes, one could understand the ways in which the groups were reorganising themselves.

It is in this light that Chapter Three will be a study of the impact of attempts at assimilation for 'minority' groups that viewed themselves and were regarded as

⁸⁶ Gans, Herbert J. "The American Kaleidoscope, Then and Now". *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What it Means to be American*. Ed. Tamar Jacoby. New York: Basic Books, 2004. 39.

immigrants to America. Barack Obama's (b.1961) *Dreams from My Father* (1995) takes centre-stage in this chapter where it charts the progress of a black individual of mixed parentage who is able to emulate the success story that was at the heart of the mythic position that America still holds as the Promised Land. As an autobiography, it features the processes of alienation and assimilation where Obama occupies the dual position that all blacks do. Even as they were identified as African Americans, it was the African part of their heritage that they found themselves struggling with and identified by whilst reconciling it with their American lives. The other two texts that I will be studying in this chapter are Jhumpa Lahiri's (b.1967) *Namesake* (2003) and Sandra Cisneros's (b.1954) *The House on Mango Street* (1984). All three novels in this chapter are from different ethnic groups and each community tends to have its own way of defining life in the Diaspora.

I felt that an exploration of literatures from Other communities living in America would help to shed light on my own study of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, and it is through conclusions drawn from Obama that I aim to finish this chapter. This chapter is based on the assumption that those who are racially different as opposed to being ethnically different continue to be categorised as the Other in America. Meanwhile, the mainstream history of the States depicts the WASPs as the original inhabitants in the 'New World' even as this plot contradicts itself by highlighting their pilgrim past and valorising their frontier spirit. This contradiction goes unquestioned while it is juxtaposed with another trend where blacks continue to exist as outsiders in America although they have cohabitated with their white masters/counterparts and worked with them to bring 'civilisation' to the New World. Once again, being the 'Old Negro' or the 'New Negro'

contributes to their secondary status because of the absence of agency therein in their identification as the 'Negro'.

Dreams from My Father is different from the other two texts because it is an autobiography while the latter are structured like the bildungsroman. It was written in an attempt to deal with the paradoxical nature of his existence because of his mixed parentage. The 'tragic mulatto' of the antebellum days becomes the present day fate of every black subject who tries to seek fulfilment in a polarised world. Even as differences are elided, the question of identity requires one to seek affiliation with a pre-existing notion regarding the self. Even as Barry in *Dreams from My Father* has a range of black figures to model himself on, he is still unsure of his position in America. This was because the more one acts 'black', the more one moves away from an American identity. In a 'free' world, Barry takes on the condition of the white mother and this is backed by his birth in Hawaii which gives him American citizenship. The African component of his identity is more marked in Obama's instance because of his dark skin inherited from his Kenyan father. He exists as a mulatto American without a father figure who could be emulated to mend the complications of his identity. This is because even as the mother is the nurturer, it is through his father's example that he can hope to order his world. Obama Sr.'s absence contributes to make his role in Barry's life all the more gaping. Barry's mother's jurisdiction only pervades the threshold of the house, and this later translates into his reluctance to talk about her and the white side of his family. This studied silence stems from the desire to avoid revelations about the other half of his identity that his skin tone conceals because he feels as if he is trying to ingratiate himself in his listener's regard by revealing an interracial background which would require adjustments to be made in the latter's comprehension of him. He struggles with what it means to be an

‘American’ who was less an ‘African American’ than a ‘Kenyan’ although he does not comprehend the implications of being the latter. Thus, he has to mediate between three positions of uncertainty.

Barry cannot comfortably claim a solely African American identity because he is also American. Being American would come easiest to him because of the time he spent with the white maternal side of his family in America. Nor can he claim his father’s Kenyan identity because he has never been there. Thus, the notion of a place contributing to an individual’s sense of self muddles any singular claim that he may try to make. At the same time, the idea of a place is elusive like identity itself. Barry does not find a way to access a preconceived and therefore, a pre-constructed self such as the ‘African American’, the ‘American’ or the ‘Kenyan’, because it would fail to adequately represent him in all his complexity.

Obama Sr.’s experience of Kenya and the West

The link between Africa and the West is also more intricate in the stories of Barry’s grandfather and father’s life. For instance, his grandfather was able to reap success by adopting some of the Western ways for his personal gains in the material world during the period of the European colonisation of Kenya. Meanwhile, Obama Sr.’s own failure in politics is located in his inability to reconcile his idealism with his life in a post-independent anarchic Kenya still attuned to the coloniser’s ways. The absent coloniser holds sway despite the changed political contours of the country. For instance, the still operating missionary schools set up by the coloniser for the native child continues to offer a colonial education in post-independent Kenya. Schooling was perceived to be necessary in order for the native to be educated to the point where s/he can be part of the

comprador class. In independent Kenya, the same native is said to have achieved the ability to be propelled to national and international significance by accumulating qualifications from colonial institutions. Thus, economic and political control continued through cultural imperialism. This kept one in the race to find appointment in leading positions in the country's nation-building project because the old ways of tribalism had vanished when expectation held that one made the transition from boyhood to a position of responsibility within the tribe.

The transformation in the tribal native's expanse happens by incorporating the remnants of the coloniser's framework into the new establishment of the African government. The new rite of passage is retold as the nationalist narrative; this is reflected in the tale that Barry feeds to his American classmates when he romanticises his father's Kenya as an exotic location where he too will return to assume authority once he comes of age. He picturises it as a chaotic land that his father would tame into submission by overpowering the other claims to his inheritance. Thus, the chaos is attractive and can be an exciting tale to narrate so long as the hero is not part of it himself, where it is the stepping stone to further glory. Although Barry is aware of his difference, he tries to play it to his advantage to compensate his yearning for an average American life. His exaltations, in effect, are just as unreliable as the anecdotes provided by his mother and maternal grandparents regarding his biological father. However, it is significant that Barry finds his extended family in Kenya squabbling over what is believed to be Obama Sr.'s legacy. The tale of his family in Kenya becomes, in effect, an analogy for the population trying to work out its valuation for individual gains instead of working together to realise their collective ideals in post-independent Kenya. Petty squabbles are heightened into national issues while the other areas of administration take a backseat. It is significant that only

Ruth's son, Mark, has the paperwork that will prove his claim to Obama Sr.'s estate. Yet, he is also the most disconnected from the landscape of his father's land, only viewing it as incidental to his existence, where "[he doesn't] ask [him]self a lot of questions about what it all means. About who [he] *really* [is]."⁸⁷ [author's italics] Barry questions the incompleteness that stems from not availing the Kenyan half of his identity that can only come from a geo-political awakening.

The question of identity in a globalised world

Meanwhile, in works like *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), a similar drive for a complete immersion in an American identity is consciously rejected in favour of an Indian subjectivity that adapts to the American context. The eventual position that the Asian settles upon is one where fusion is allowed for, but the core remains Eastern. This balance is best achieved by Ashima Ganguli despite her steadfast efforts to symbolise herself as an Indian woman who follows her husband to a strange continent without voicing discontent because that was what marriage entailed for the traditional Bengali girl. At the end of the novel, living in America affects her as well where she "will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere."⁸⁸ The nostalgic yearning for family in India coexists with the semi-American life she cultivates under the demands by her children to make the household representative of the average American family; despite being completely involved in her nuclear family, her life resists the compartmentalisation required to claim a solely Indian identity.

⁸⁷ Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father*. Edinburgh, New York and Melbourne: Canongate Books Ltd., 2004. 344.

⁸⁸ Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2007. 276.

Even as she continues to mourn Ashoke, widowhood gives her the agency to decide where she wants to be without being obligated to follow someone else's lead. Instead of choosing between India and the States which would have returned her to the one-dimensional existence that she began with, her world expands to include both when she realises mostly through Ashoke's death and her children's experiences that, despite her isolation and passivity which are typical of the traditional Indian wife, America too is a formative part of her life. Thus, Ashima is able to benefit the most because her liberation on American soil is not dichotomous with her essential Indian-ness.

This makes Ashima appear best suited to the Diasporic conditions compared to the likes of Moushumi and Gogol, who are second generation American-born Indians sans their parents' attachment to India. If contrasted with Barry, it is Ashima's supreme belief in her Indian identity that keeps her from the constant search for certainty that characterises Barry's story. Even with Gogol, the connection with India is never completely severed because he is acutely aware of his difference through reminders generated by daily interaction with other communities as well as from within his own family and community. The latter usually comes in the form of proscriptions that are vigilant against un-Indian behaviour. Although the second generation may lack in nationalistic fervour, they have a strong sense of cultural identity, which is missing in the case of the African American who finds himself creating 'black' cultural and political consciousness as in Chapter One and Two. The first generation Indian immigrants have an essence to fall back on when they reach out to each other recreating their own India through a network of surrogate aunts, uncles and cousins in America in their celebrations and rituals. A similar solution to the African American problem, however, seems virtually difficult because of the impossibility of reaching out to pristine localities in the United States or in

the African continent that could offer the questing subject values from the golden age of African civilisation. The complete erasure of the African past and the negative images that still ambushes the African and the African American self, make it difficult to chart a new path of progress. This was because the African ways had been thoroughly replaced by Eurocentric ones.

Attempts at recuperation in the name of black culture have dual implications because “[t]he blackness that mark[ed them] off for permanent subordination and various forms of abuse [was] also what [gave them] a sense of identity, community, and history. It [was their] “we”. Thus, to assault racial identity [made them] appear foolishly in rebellion against common sense”.⁸⁹ The building of an alternate model marked their difference and reinforced certain stereotypes regarding the community. This problematises the concept of demarcation because it imposes limitations upon the subject’s lived experience. Similarly, the deconstruction of boundaries invariably means that the reference points that come with an epicentre were removed, giving the subject nothing to fall back on. This justifies the need to essentialise, making it difficult to move beyond the binaries amid fears that integration would entail becoming less of what one already was.

The difference in the experience of the African and the Indian dealing with cultural imperialism can be located in the tactics used to subjugate the ‘natives’. While both civilisations were overpowered, attempts were made to inculcate inferiority in the Indians by colonising their minds through the school curriculum and commerce. The African American, by contrast, was overpowered by a combination of colonial schools and brutalisation by enslavement, a strategy that warped their lives and required cultural

⁸⁹ Smith, David Lionel. “What is Black Culture?” *The House that Race Built*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

recovery. Their past of forced transportation and exile in a foreign locale and the continuing barriers to integration still exerted its presence in the contemporary world. The Indian subject dealt with the emasculation they experienced in the material sphere by internalising their inferiority and mimicking the Western masters in order to bridge the scientific and technological gap.

Another strategy they formulated required them to come to terms with their 'backwardness' in the material sphere when it came to science and technology. This acceptance of the empirical was countered by their superiority in the spiritual realm where it was believed that "It is the spiritual which lies within, which is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. It follows that as long as we take care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness necessary to adapt ourselves to the requirements of a modern material world without losing our true identity."⁹⁰ Thus, despite colonisation, their identity remained true to their origins because calculations were made regarding the degree to which change would be allowed. The impact of imperialism stopped at the threshold of the home through special efforts made to endorse their spiritual and cultural lives. The African American, by contrast, had to deal with the intrusion of the European slaveholder by trying to mimic their ways in order to argue for their release from enslavement. While both the Indian and the African American suffered from ill-treatment, the Indian community was the better-prepared to overturn the status quo because it continued to exert its command over economics to utilise education and hoist itself into a position of authority that needed to be reckoned internationally. Ashoke and the other Bengali friends that the Gangulis make in America in *The Namesake* exemplify

⁹⁰ Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question". *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women: 1989.

this trend. Thus, despite being an outsider, he is able to command respect in the academic and Bengali circles where he has made a name for himself. However, once he steps out of this space, he too is susceptible to racist attacks. He responds with indifference to the vandalism that reduces the Ganguli signpost to “gang” – “It’s only boys having fun”⁹¹ –as if it is part of the cost that the family has to pay as per their choice to switch countries. There are no scenes that record an embrace of America except in his decision to leave India.

The African in Indian writings

In most Indian novels themed on the Diaspora like *The Namesake* or *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b.1956), the reader will not find the protagonist negotiating with the African American community in the States. Usually America is conceived and typecasted as an all-white society. In literature on the Indian community in Africa, the African community maybe portrayed but mostly in passing as marginal characters. They merge into the background and feature as props as in V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* (1979). The white coloniser remains the central figure that the Indian protagonist has to reckon with. Thus, while the coloniser was the antagonist, the other peoples affected were matters that could be the subject of study or another subaltern group that could be collaborated with for empowerment. Instead they exist slightly out of focus in the viewfinder. There was no attempt to reorganise to form a single unit of the dispossessed which could grant them some leverage when it comes to negotiating

⁹¹ Lahiri, *Namesake* 68.

While the coloniser surrendered its African colonies, there was no easy return that the African American could engineer to revive the self that belonged to his/her ancestor. Barry's birth in a predominantly white household, his growth into consciousness and his maturing black body coincide with his realisation of his difference. Readers see the narrator struggling to come to terms with his identity. Obama admits that growing up in Hawaii was probably easier than the mainland because of the confused state of diffused power among the variety of people that could be found there, "and so few blacks that the most ardent segregationist could enjoy a vacation secure in the knowledge that race mixing in Hawaii had little to do with the established order back home".⁹² His maternal grandparents have the space to be non-conformists when they accede to their daughter marrying a black Kenyan. Despite attempts by his mother and grandparents to familiarise Barry with his father, it is made clear that he held the sort of fascination that Othello did for the Venetian court and Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* – "My mother was that girl with the movie of beautiful black people in her head, flattered by my father's attention, confused and alone, trying to break out of the grip of her own parents' lives."⁹³

Being African while American

Even as a hyphenated American identity is accepted, it is significant that the subject in *Dream from Mt Father* and *The Namesake* desires a selfhood that is felt to be comprehensive. A hyphenated identity suggests an un-American subjectivity, and this justifies the group's borderline existence in America and their exclusion from the mainstream. It suggests that the individual has his/her cultural roots elsewhere, and that this prevents him from a complete identification with the dominant culture. However,

⁹² Obama, *Dreams* 24.

⁹³ Obama, *Dreams* 127.

there is no scope for Barry to assume a complete identity as a Kenyan or an Indonesian. Despite Barry's immersion in an Indonesian life signified by his intake of what he knows to be its outrageous food menus by American standards, which included "dog meat (tough), snake meat (tougher), and roasted grasshopper (crunchy)", and he views his stay there as "one long adventure"⁹⁴, it becomes apparent that it was all for the thrill of being able to write home to his grandparents about it. He never identifies with the people despite his acceptance into the milieu. Thus, being a part of Indonesia cannot be enough when he stumbles on articles recording the mishaps suffered by black men and women who undergo medical procedures in their desire to be white. They become cautionary tales for the black child who is jolted out of his complacency in his discovery of black people who believed that happiness awaited them in the acquisition of a white body. In this case, the body was commodified, the demand and the supply for which stemmed from the self-loathing created by racism.

During his sojourn in Indonesia, Barry becomes aware that his roots lay elsewhere. He responds to the complication of his life by tracing his lineage to his real father because Lolo, Barry's step-father, in his anxieties proves to be inadequate when it comes to finding answers which did not sanction the status quo. In addition, Barry's mother teaches him to reject Lolo's pacifist acquiescence to life in Indonesia. Barry explains, "In a land where fatalism remained a necessary tool for enduring hardship, where ultimate truths were kept separate from day-to-day realities, [his mother] was a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism."⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Obama, *Dreams* 37.

⁹⁵ Obama, *Dreams* 50.

Barry takes to romanticising about his Kenyan roots by creating a fiction around his absent biological father who remains the silent character of others' narratives. His research on the Luo becomes an attempt to achieve tangibility, and the subsequent disappointment that the discovery yields convolutes his position further because it dissipates his fantasies by lowering his self-esteem. Even as he is bracketed in with the Luos because he takes on his father's lineage cohering with the patriarchal formation of identity, he is taught to be an American by his mother during his stay in Indonesia. The radical element in her attempt to reorient him as American, through an identification of himself with the matriarch, toys with gender and racial lines. It has the potential to liberate him through a feminist reimagining of the world. However, it initiates a dual life for Barry where his position in his maternal grandparents' house is decoloured and therefore, without racial affiliations. The multiculturalism is in reality a studied silence concerning certain topics where the qualifier 'black' is taboo, and everyone is always on the watch against what they say. Barry's grandmother, Toot, finds herself omitting the racial affiliation of the man who scares her on her way to work when she narrates the incident to her concerned grandson. This incident compels Barry to re-examine the home that his grandparents created for him. Like his grandfather's black acquaintance, Frank, Barry never finds the ease that his grandfather can unassumingly surrender himself to be able to doze off in the former's house during visits. Frank explains that Toot's fear was in reality her awareness of the black history of dispossession and the justified anger that remains unaddressed; it represents her guilt passed down by her ancestors in such a way that she responds with fear when she comes in contact with the black man. The fear is the product of the isolation of the meeting as well as the skin colour of the man. In this instance, Toot's guilt makes her assume the victim position because "[s]he understands

that black people have a reason to hate”⁹⁶ due to the history of negotiation between the two races. The presentation of the black man is replete with fear because black rage is shown as destructive. A white woman’s need to fear a black man, her position as an easy target takes away the black man’s – and by extension, his community’s – right to be angry and to seek reparation. Barry has to contend with challenges that simultaneously forms and destabilises his identity. At the same time, Barry’s tutorship by his mother is conducted with due solemnity where he is woken at four every dawn to listen to her discourses on American identity. In the initial phase of her life in Indonesia, she encourages Barry’s acculturation in order to make it easier for him to live there. The initiation into susceptibilities that attends an Indonesian life becomes evident through Lolo’s own misfortunes in Indonesia, which makes assimilation undesirable, even fatal, to the individual. In Barry’s case, the assimilation is a two-way process. This is because not only does Barry ‘act’ Indonesian, he is also accepted as one because of his skin colour. His pro-Oriental appearance makes it easier for him to blend in than his mother. His mother’s own position is tentative as “a foreigner, middle-class and white and protected by her heredity whether she wanted protection or not. She could always leave if things got too messy.”⁹⁷ Ann comes to realise that involvement in and identification with an Asian life as an option that is available to Barry whereas she will only be a foreigner with an Indonesian husband. The superior political and economic power of America in the international arena impacts the personal relations that she forms in foreign lands. Her American passport cocoons her with the sort of security that it cannot extend to her son who is the racial Other. She understands that she will always be at a remove because of her racial affiliation, which makes her untouchable. Any affront on her person would be

⁹⁶ Obama, *Dreams* 91.

⁹⁷ Obama, *Dreams* 46.

understood to be a challenge directed at the federal government of the United States. However, this does not prevent her sexual harassment by her American male counterparts whilst attending Lolo's company's dinner parties. Her son, by contrast, exists as a citizen with tentative claims to America, who could be motivated by the welcome he is given in Indonesia to move away from the protection he may be given as an American albeit a black citizen. She exists only as a temporary resident in Indonesia despite her investments there in terms of a Indonesian husband and a child, Maya. This makes it necessary for her to defamiliarise Barry from the landscape, to realise and benefit from "the chasm that separated the life chances of an American from those of an Indonesian. She knew which side of the divide she wanted her child to be on. I was an American, she decided, and my true life lay elsewhere."⁹⁸ She falls back on Barry's American and African heritage to counter his more immediate immersion in Indonesian culture. Barry's absent but 'real' father is drawn upon to diminish what his surrogate father's land offers.

The scholarship on Americanism is believed to be necessary given his mother's anxiety regarding a place that she fears is detrimental to her son's socialisation because he is fits into the landscape and the Indonesian model with ease. The implication is that his ability to blend in Indonesia puts him at risk. Similarly, he is troubled with the encyclopaedic book's description of his father's people, the Luo. The book describes Barry's people as "The Luo raised cattle and lived in mud huts and ate corn meal and yams and something called millet. Their traditional costume was a leather thong across the crotch."⁹⁹ At his point, Barry occupies the dual position of the explorers who discovered Africa as well as the natives that inhabited it. However, as the explorer, what he peers into is a reflection of

⁹⁸ Obama, *Dreams* 47.

⁹⁹ Obama, *Dreams* 64.

his own soul, and he reacts with horror. His evaluation of the natives is in effect his irrevocable sentencing of himself, and the act leaves him forever looking inward to find answers to what he stands for as a result of his categorisation as a Luo. The book's description on the Luos does not convey any of the glory that he had imagined surrounding his father following the instructions of his mother and the visions of ancient Egypt that he modelled Kenya on. In short, the Luo's existence is defined through a lack although the no overt attempt seems to be made to evaluate their lifestyle. However, by this point, qualifiers are unnecessary because of the reader's acceptance of Western definitions of progress such that any difference as seen in Africa can only be the evidence of an inferior people. . The book's encapsulation triggers Barry's horror because he observes them as a Westerner, and concludes that their way of life is primitive. This reveals his education by his mother to be an American as successful, but it also robs him of the power to discern that every civilisation may have progressed in a distinctly different way, separate from the Western definition of modernity. The observation lies in stark contrast with his earlier tracing of his lineage to the chief of the tribe which is every boy's dream whilst growing up and coming into age to claim an exotic heritage. Despite the fluidity of his hybrid identity, he must always strive to pattern a white American while struggling with his identity as the Other in his own household and elsewhere.

This explains his inability to come to terms with his position as the Other in the material world in his reluctance to befriend Coretta, the only other black student in his class who also occupies marginal status and reminds him of himself. They are naturally drawn to each other; their shared ostracism pushes them to seek a companion in the other due to the estrangement they endure from the rest of the class. Since it is the colour of their skin that singles them out, when they are discovered playing together and ridiculed for it, the

anger that surfaces in Obama is unleashed on her because she forms an easy target as ‘the weaker sex’. Also, as a member of the black community, she lacks the tools to challenge acts due to the singularity of her position. Barry’s racial anger is inwardly vented underscoring the lack of scope to properly channelize distress. It is automatically assumed by his classmates that Barry and Coretta can only be in league given the commonality of their skin tone. Their friendship is mocked by giving it a romantic twist that embarrasses Barry. Nor can he settle into a romantic relationship with a white woman. His white girlfriend views black anger as “a dead end” while Barry sees it as “a matter of remembering”.¹⁰⁰ The suppression of the blacks that sprouts artists focusing on black hopes and fears in their expression of black culture can easily be simplified by white onlookers as part of an ongoing, uncritical black rant that is beguiling because it is non-productive. The act is taken out of context and given a hearing that is reductive in its interpretation. In her supportive argument that “[s]he couldn’t be black ... She would if she could, but she couldn’t. She could only be herself, and [that] wasn’t enough”¹⁰¹, she expresses unintelligibility when it comes to crossing racial borderlines because of the high walls of inclusivity constructed by creating a ‘black’ culture for its members. Her emotional outburst seems “dismiss[ive of] the role of imagination, intelligence, discipline, and hard work [that goes] in the making of [artistic productions] ..., not to mention the spectrum of other normal emotions, such as love, sadness and amusement.”¹⁰² Such a view dissects the play they have watched together as excessive show of emotions that is an aberration because it goes away from the Western sanction of moderation.

¹⁰⁰ Obama, *Dreams* 211.

¹⁰¹ Obama, *Dreams* 211.

¹⁰² Smith, *The House That Race Built* 185.

Although the estrangement between Coretta and Barry is not remedied and the reader is not privy to any details pertaining to Coretta's upbringing, she responds similarly to Barry's own gratitude during his father's presentation on the Luo in school. Here, I have assumed that Coretta hails from the emancipated African American community. While Barry fears that his father will expose him to ridicule in his talk on the Luo, for Coretta, Africa exists more as a homogenised territory. She is aware that the details that will emerge from Obama Sr.'s presentation are pertinent to her in ways that defies her own relevance to the American landscape. Despite belonging to America, it is still her arrival from Africa that holds significance, and conflicts with any claim that she may lay to a Western identity. Although it is unlikely for her to know which tribe her ancestors may hail from, she identifies with the same lurking hope and fear in every black child growing up in a divided landscape. To her and to the white classmates, Africa exists without borderlines. Existing as a nondescript mass may be a way through which the Africans may re-imagine the continent; this would put an end to all the internal political bickering that stemmed from tribalism. However, for the Western or Westernised outsider to adopt the same strategy reduces the complexity of an entire landmass which is part of the ongoing process of neo-colonialism by perpetuating the old stereotypes about the unknown, and thereby, containing it as a mass. On the other hand, Barry's father's presentation poses the question as to whether what has been delineated is only one side of the coin because he is aware of the version that holds popular sway in the Western world. This makes it important to focus on the other side, but this makes for a one-sided portrait.

The legacy of his father becomes all the more important in light of the general tendency to essentialise America as an all-white society which casts him as an outsider even in his white maternal household. Barry tries to recreate himself in the image of his absent father

given the inappropriateness of other figures like his grandfather and Lolo as substitutes. Even as he has a wide expanse to choose from to fill in the void, he is limited by his fear of the Other that his father is, and which he is too, by extension. Although Ann tries to be a role model, her presence in the novel does not amount to much. Barack Obama admits in his "Preface to the 2004 Edition" of *Dreams from My Father* that "had [he] known [his mother] would not survive her illness, [he] might have written a different book – less a meditation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in [his] life."¹⁰³

Thus, Barry steadfastly holds onto his idealisation of his father as "the brilliant scholar, the generous friend, the upstanding leader".¹⁰⁴ And so, "my father became a prop in someone else's narrative. An attractive prop – the alien figure with the heart of gold, the mysterious stranger who saves the town and wins the girl – but a prop nonetheless."¹⁰⁵ The pilgrimage to Africa remains one of the viable means by which he can hope to arrive at "wholeness"¹⁰⁶ by uncovering the story of his father, free from the interpretations offered by his white family. The fact that their anecdotes cannot suffice becomes apparent in a key incident when his grandmother fears the approach of a black man as a potential aggressor. Despite her agitation, Toot is careful to omit her colour prejudice when she narrates the incident to her grandson. The requirement of tact reveals that the household is not as free from racial prejudices as much as it would lay claim to.

The implication of a hyphenated life

¹⁰³ Obama, *Dreams* xii.

¹⁰⁴ Obama, *Dreams* 220.

¹⁰⁵ Obama, *Dreams* 26.

¹⁰⁶ Obama, *Dreams* 204.

Barry's life on the fringes of American society can be studied alongside works from other communities to understand the ways in which the individuals have constructed their identity while negotiating with the larger mainstream that demanded adherence in order to quench the yearning offset by the Diaspora to belong to a place. Each participant has to deal with the insinuations of betrayal and the demands of acculturation. In *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, the reader will see that although immersion is desired, it is never possible to be only American. Gogol's preference for American culture through festivals like Christmas cannot completely erase the dormant Bengali in him.

The protagonist in *The Namesake* grows up identifying with American culture while his parents' Indian-ness makes inconvenient demands on his participation in cultural acts difficult to accommodate in his life because he identifies with the mainstream. The pilgrimage-like trips that the Gangulis make to India are perceived as interruptions. The little space accorded to these visits in the narrative record reactions of shock, discomfort or an inability to understand the attachment that their parents harbour towards their country of origin. Gogol and Sonia view them as redundant events that have no import on their existence except for the tanned skin they bring back at the conclusion of every visit. The discomfort endured during the trip recedes with the gradual lightening of his colouration. No connection is made with the blood relatives that he meets during his trips there or with the Bengali families that his parents consider as family friends in the States. They are events forced on him, and he shirks the idea of Indian youths as friends that he can reach out to in the bewilderment generated by his foreignness. The club for "American-born confused deshi" is not for him such that "[h]e avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so

much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share.”¹⁰⁷ Instead, every attempt is made to Americanise himself in his choice of friends. This is the most apparent in his choice of Maxine Ratliff as his girlfriend through whom he accesses those aspects of American lifestyle that would be an anomaly in his parents’ house. The security of the Ratliff’s lives is alien to his parents, and for a brief while, the ensuing ease is fed by the lack of scrutiny on his part until the sudden death of Ashoke Ganguli. The resultant shock and distress immerses him in the Indian and Hindu way of mourning, and marks his breakaway from Maxine and his desire for assimilation through her when he feels that her condolences are not enough to assuage his grief and guilt for wanting to get away from his parents.

Despite the ease with which he can pattern his lifestyle according to the Ratliff’s household, it is revealed that the situation is not a complete fit. The doubt is sown through queries posted by the guests invited to his birthday party thrown by Maxine’s parents conversing on the typical Indian’s immunity to disease in India. Although he wishes to be free of his parents and the heritage that they cling to, Gogol is distraught to find that despite his birth granting him an American passport and his lack of involvement with anything Indian, he is still identified primarily as an Indian immigrant by white Americans who view themselves as the authentic stock. His Asian-ness is alien, and he is always in a state of arrival. The progress as a second-generation American-Indian is nullified in a context where their community is regarded as outsiders with India as an inherent component of their physical and psychological makeup. Although he looks to Maxine at this point to consolidate his claim to an American identity and soothe his

¹⁰⁷ Lahiri, *Namesake* 119.

ruffled feathers, her 'betrayal' is registered by her being busy with another guest such that he has to fend for himself among hostile residents. His father's death proves to be the turning point in their relationship where he does not bother to translate or render accessible the Hindu rites for the deceased to her. By this exclusionary act, her position in the Ganguli household as an outsider is underscored.

Gogol suspects that Maxine's strangeness to his family and culture would culminate in her inability to comprehend his grief; the same question is not posed with regards to the Bengali friends that assemble for the funeral from six different states. Although they appear as a monolithic group, it is assumed that they are probably prototypes of Ashima and Ashoke since they are never delved into by the narrator. It is their membership in the Bengali community and their friendship/acquaintanceship with his father that counts as opposed to Maxine's own place in his life. Thus, his grief re-connects him with his family and community in ways that motivates his return, foreshadowing his marriage with Moushumi because of the commonality of experiences they are bound to share as immigrants striving for membership in the mainstream. Despite the impact of colonisation in modern India where his family name "Ganguli" is an anglicisation of "Gangopadhyay", and the fluidity that seeps into his identity during his sojourn in America, there are rituals from Hinduism that remain intact, waiting to be drawn upon although dismissed as inconsequential until then.

The transition is explained through grief being channelized by a structured medium such as the prohibitions that the deceased's family observes in their food intake allows him to mourn with due recourse where earlier he "was bored by it, annoyed at having to observe a ritual no one else he knew followed, in honor of people he had seen only a few times in

his life ... Now sitting at the kitchen table at six-thirty every evening, the hour feeling more like midnight through the window, his father's chair empty, this meatless meal is the only thing that seems to make sense."¹⁰⁸ Maxine's offer to get away from the mourning house is rejected in favour of the Indian way of releasing grief through rituals that must be observed. The act of shaving one's head in the wake of a parent's death becomes his first political act remaking himself as an Indian with an American passport, and for the first time, he remembers and imitates his father's gesture. The reverence replaces the earlier childish thoughtlessness that he had pursued for most of his life where he "had laughed at the sight of his hairless, grief-stricken father".¹⁰⁹ Going away or distancing oneself is no longer an option since it is his father this time. At this juncture Gogol is able to re-establish some link with 'being Indian' in ways that he never did with the geographical location. The way in which Gogol deals with his grief can be understood in light of what Partha Chatterjee stated regarding the importance of the spiritual sphere for the Indian subject to remain intact in the face of assaults in the material world that confirmed the brown man's inferiority compared to the white master class. His struggle to achieve oneness and the fragmentation that he endures in his American life makes him reject Maxine and the simplicity and uncritical life that she offers.

Ashoke's death makes Gogol rethink his identity vis-à-vis his rebellion against his parents' expectations. His return as the prodigal son in *The Namesake* can be compared to the inevitability of the failure that meets Barry in *Dreams from My Father* in the construction of his identity in America, Indonesia or Kenya. The fact that Barry is both black and white comes in the way of his complete immersion in his black identity, which

¹⁰⁸ Lahiri, *Namesake* 180.

¹⁰⁹ Lahiri, *Namesake* 179.

is the identity that he is instantly accorded when interacting with anyone for the first time. A wholehearted collusion in grievances regarding white folks is interrupted by the guilt-ridden images of his mother or grandmother. Nor is it possible for him to share his problematic politics of identity with his white family. He is able to attain more intimacy with black friends, and he tries to prioritise his work as a community organiser by pushing the issues of the identity crisis that he suffers to the background. He wishes to move beyond racial affiliations in a life that requires him to be occasionally subjected to a “searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am ... the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds.”¹¹⁰ This necessitates his reckoning with his father’s Kenya to complete the painful procedure of identity formation that requires him to come face-to-face with the image that he had mirrored himself on although it has been a “selective embrace”.¹¹¹

Barry’s reckoning with Africa

The fleeting images of Africa that he espies during his stay there alternates between Africa as the quintessential barbaric and corrupted as well as the place of his origin. It continues to offer itself as the Promised Land for those hyphenated Africans who encountered slavery or willingly migrated to far off lands. Thus, it is in Kenya that Barry is offered brief glimpses of integration along familial and racial lines. His name bears relevance in the African continent for it is embrative in its definitive action where “My name belonged and so I belonged”.¹¹² Like Gogol, Barry also discovers the spell that names can cast on the individual where it shapes the subject’s sense of self as well as the

¹¹⁰ Obama, *Dreams* xv.

¹¹¹ Obama, *Dreams* 302.

¹¹² Obama, *Dreams* 304.

world around him/her by introducing a geo-politicised edge to their existence. With the capacity to alienate or realign, his name asserts itself all the more in Kenya where he finally learns its true meaning, while branding its claim on the subject when s/he moves out of the community as it does with Gogol. The sea of black bodies that Barry sights in the market place offers him an epiphany, inspiring him with the ease that comes with his release from the panoptic gaze of the white observer.

You could see a man talking to himself as just plain crazy, or read about the criminal on the front page of the daily paper and ponder the corruption of the human heart, without having to think about whether the criminal or lunatic said something about your own fate. Here the world was black, and so you were just you; you would discover all those things that were unique to your life without living a lie or committing betrayal.¹¹³

He can stop being a psychotic subject for a while to become a complete self, unburdened of significances and released from dissection and from always becoming an example. This, in effect, makes him the scapegoat for everything that is wrong with the African continent. Africa offers him a space where an attribute or a diagnosis can be separated from the individual. The notion of a trait being intrinsic to Africa is rejected. He is relieved of the stereotypes he has had to carry as a black man. He is not the mongrel returnee ready to utilise his decided advantage over the natives because he is armed with his American passport and ways. However, the moment passes because a decolonised self is not a commodity that can be bought. Negotiation with the facts of his existence is necessary to be able to arrive at a point where the subject can become a full-fledged

¹¹³ Obama, *Dreams* 307.

individual. Kenya too is far from perfect. Barry finds that Kenya forms a mirror image with Indonesia where attempts at severing his intimations by his mother went as far as sending him back to the States so that he can live under the stabilising influence of his maternal grandparents. He finds that the same sense of nihilism pervades Kenya's makeup where those with the power tended to be despots.

There are references to relatives who have "been lost ... [e]ven if people know where they are".¹¹⁴ They are individuals who have forsaken their homeland in their search for a better life elsewhere. A similar concern resonates through *The House on Mango Street* where "[t]he ones he left behind are far away, will wonder, shrug, remember. Geraldo – he went north ... we never heard from him again."¹¹⁵ Although mobility is encouraged because of the higher chances of success it offers to the individual, it is perceived ambivalently because it takes the immigrant away from the protection that the group can offer. It weakens the group and makes the individual vulnerable to the ways of the world, which in turn can destroy the selfhood conceived while living among those of his/her kind. Going away is frowned upon as betrayal because it is a reordering of the subject's way of life where group identity is reworked in favour of individual identity. This is regarded in negative light because it is feared that the member is less likely to stay in touch with the group because s/he is vulnerable to change as a solitary traveller. The poor living condition of the areas around Mango Street are shunned by those who live in the suburbs and gradually abandoned by those regarded as 'trashy' whites who aspire to move out while the immigrants and illegal residents move in. The difference in the living conditions manifests itself in economic, political and cultural negotiations that one

¹¹⁴ Obama, *Dreams* 307.

¹¹⁵ Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009. 66.

engages in with other groups. This fosters the immigrants' own dreams of commanding the purchasing power to move into the suburbs one day in search of their own little portion of the American pie. In both *The House on Mango Street* and *Dreams from My Father* there are multiple efforts to integrate as well as to move away. The drive is always towards collectivity in an environment that breeds distrust against 'outsiders'.

The will to power exercised by the African individuals is in opposition to the fear of power that convinces Barry's mother to keep him away from its influence. In a tyrannical administration, "power was undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory".¹¹⁶ Obama Sr.'s own story plays out in his tussle with power while adhering to his idealism. The status quo demands that one can only overcome the stalemate brought into play by the bureaucratic red tape through one's favour from those in power. Although Kenya has its own freedom heroes like Dedan Kimathi, who struggled to free the country from the grip of the coloniser, these figures have been taken from public memories and national pride to be given a name in a street sign where their significance blurs with time as they become commonplace. These names are lost in one's struggles with the mundane reality of the streets where one witnesses instances of one's powerlessness. The redundancy of the act resides in the position that Kenya has in Africa where despite the ideals that powered the freedom struggle, liberation remains a distant possibility. As a post-colonial state, Kenya has a fractured sense of nationhood that offers its tourists and the white residents that elected to stay at the end of the colonial rule "an age when the lives of whites in foreign lands rested comfortably on the backs of the darker races".¹¹⁷ The handover and the initiation of black rule in Africa does not question

¹¹⁶ Obama, *Dreams* 44.

¹¹⁷ Obama, *Dreams* 314.

the status quo established during the colonial times. The new black administration was replicated along neo-colonial lines that reinstated the blacks as the underclass. Hence, Obama Sr.'s meet with frustration is inevitable because education and the ability to serve in a post alone is not enough to recommend one's qualifications if one does not comply with the powers-that-be. The story of his father does not offer Barry any answer in his attempt to achieve oneness; all it can do is to acquaint him with the man that his father was, and his inability to understand the ways in which deprivation has transformed his country into a self-serving population under colonial rule.

Auma's frugality, in this context, is frowned upon because "Her restlessness, her independence, her constant willingness to project into the future – all this struck the family as unnatural somehow. Unnatural ... and un-Africa."¹¹⁸ The psychological and emotional fortress that the unit of the family offers against hostility mutates into an economic unit where the will to life justifies one's parasitic activities. Thus, the waiters at the restaurants elect to serve their white customers, neglecting Auma and Barry believing that they are more likely to benefit from this monetarily because of the former's decided superior purchasing power. The waiter's reactionary tactics undermine their own position in the country, but this was necessary if they are to survive in the short term. However, success comes at the cost of vying against each other while their black customers wait to be served. Through incidents like this, the workings of neo-colonialism can be seen in operation in Kenya.

The transformative power that Africa is said to have on black pilgrims from the Diaspora has dual implications if it is to be understood in its entirety. Africa offers regeneration to

¹¹⁸ Obama, *Dreams* 330.

those that seek it because it is ultimately understood or regarded as the Promised Land for those displaced abroad suffering humiliating racist incidents. At the same time, there can be no solution that can completely erase the history of European imperialism and its continuing after-effects in those post-colonial states. Despite his fantasies of a proper family complete with the presence of his father in Kenya, living there is not an option for Barry just like there can be no return to a 'pristine' Indian or American state or a wholeness that comes from a union between the two for Gogol. The drive for repossession does not include identity formation along racial lines. Only Moushumi is able to exercise this by going away to Paris to create a new identity for herself. However, her temporary life of rebellion must give way to the heteronormative whether it is through her marriage with Graham or Gogol or through her extramarital affair with Dmitri. She ends up seeking an elusive identity in her relationship with each man which leaves her dissatisfied with her decision to settle. Thus, Barry can only be in Kenya for a short vacation and Gogol can experience marital bliss in the short term because these solutions do not deal with the crux of the problem that is created by the Diaspora and the desire to belong in an age of increased travel. The dissolution of the community leaves the subject unable to adjust to the demands of a cosmopolitan life that deprives them of identity even as it grants them anonymity.

A final bid at assimilation

Assimilation into Americanism is inevitable for the likes of Barry and Gogol because of their residence there. The disorientation is caused by the confusions of a global subjectivity in terms of the choices they are forced to make in the instance of Gogol and Moushumi. It is the experience of her son's marital woes that makes Ashima re-examine

and readjust her initial resistance to Gogol's white girlfriends. At the end of the narrative, readers are not informed of the racial affiliation of Sonia's fiancé Ben. Meanwhile, it is Gogol and Moushumi's own failed relationships with members of the white community that leads them to conclude that while the mainstream continues to fascinate them, they will always be sensitive about their Indian origin so much so that Moushumi will reject her fiancé for speaking ill of his experience in India although she shares his opinion "[f]or it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family's heritage, another to hear it from him. She realized that he had fooled everyone, including her."¹¹⁹ The similarity in their opinion about India does not bring them together. There is a refusal to accept Graham's negative review because of the thin line that demarcates them from racial expletives given the history of interaction between the two communities which began as mutually exclusive binaries.

The relationship that Moushumi quickly forms with Gogol is consequently the result of their awareness of the collective desire of their community to ward against dilution that comes with its members moving away by marrying outsiders. When it comes to accepting outsiders, like the Mozumdars' attempt to do with Graham, the family's insistence on an elaborate Hindu wedding is their endeavour to welcome him into the family through a heavy emphasis on their own culture because it secures them from disenchantment. This is especially in the face of anxieties that the Western outsider will not be able to understand, and therefore, appreciate the coherence in their rituals. This overemphasis evokes weariness on the part of the bride and groom who had till then interacted as two cosmopolitan individuals where Moushumi's Indian background was never allowed to become a component of her behaviour or attitude. However, Moushumi's association

¹¹⁹ Lahiri, *Namesake* 217.

with an outsider entails opening her culture and ways to a different interpretation which includes ridicule, making the disappointment of his indifference all the more acute. With Gogol, Moushumi can relax due to their mutual feelings regarding the overbearing Bengali ways from which they can turn to each other against its intrusiveness. What induces a blush can be borne in the company of the other because of their complicity in the belief that the life they will be leading together will be 'modern', and therefore, less Indian. Although anxieties about authenticity are ruminated by the likes of Ashima, who are first generation immigrants, this is replaced by Gogol and Moushumi's need to formulate an identity that is an amalgamation of their world experiences. For Moushumi, this is possible only when she moves to Paris because there are limits to what she can be in America set by her family members who rein her in despite allowing her the freedom to choose a spouse like Graham.

For those natives in Africa, looking to America was necessitated by the absence of movements similar to the examples set by "Harlem. Chacago. Langston Hughes and James Baldwin ...The chance to study in America was very important. A hopeful time. Of course when we returned we realized that our education did not always serve us so well. Or the people who had sent us. There was all this messy history to deal with."¹²⁰ There is a similar trend to look to Africa for an answer in terms of authenticity or a past that they can call their own without the undignified tinge their history takes on with the intrusion of the colonisers. This is usually a skewed attempt at revisionist history, springing from defensiveness or a refusal to accept the permeability of cultures because of the indignant feelings of those affected as this meant that there were no authentic cultural practices to defend. Such an attitude demands authenticity without realising its

¹²⁰ Obama, *Dreams* 433.

impossibility. “Unfortunately, the white man has made us very defensive. We end up clinging to all sorts of things that have outlived their usefulness.”¹²¹ Practices like polygamy becomes a stumbling block; criticism is viewed as synonymous with Westernisation which the Eastern grand narratives hold will lead to further distortion of what it is to be African. Thus, engagement with an issue without factors like colonialism and colour prejudice lurking in the background is disqualified as anachronistic.

Finally, in *The House on Mango Street*, assimilation is conceptualised in terms of gender, education, and an ethnic minority’s ability to exercise social mobility. The narrative is concerned with the female artist’s need to find space, where she can express herself without the frequent interruptions that come with living in a cramped house. This takes the form of the frequently voiced expectation that she settle down or demands that she assist her mother with housekeeping in a patriarchal house. Even as she later writes about the life that she knows, this comes as a result of the distance she is able to achieve from her community. In this case, the space is both economic as well as artistic. Esperanza’s family moves a few times before it settles down in Mango Street, but the house that they purchase is a far cry from the one that they had always dreamed of. As a migrant family from Mexico, the need to own a place of their own in America is important because it helps to situate them in the country. Their purchase of a house can be understood as a mark of permanency in an otherwise gypsy life where they are always in danger of departure or deportation. The house situates them as they come to see themselves more as people who are there to stay. However, the condition of the house and the rundown neighbourhood makes it difficult to accept that this is the final move. The family compensates for it by telling each other that their stay there will be temporary, that this is

¹²¹ Obama, *Dreams* 434.

going to be another temporary arrangement before they move into the final one. "Indeed, owning the house on Mango Street actually inhibits Esperanza's family and any dream they might have had for further integration and mobility out of the neighbourhood, because of their lack of means to secure higher priced housing outside of the barrio."¹²²

When Esperanza is finally able to own a house of her own outside the community, it is "Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house of my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories."¹²³ Even as it is an individualistic decision, the achievement of a house signifies material success which signals her empowerment with the ability to return because "I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out."¹²⁴ Thus, the move out of the community is never final. The link remains because she draws on her life in Mango Street when it comes to writing her stories. Her artistry is in fact cultural productions recording the aspirations and apprehensions of the Mexican community in America. As much as one needs a house of one's own, it is never a breakaway from the community because they exist as a collective unit, relying on each other for emotional support. This is especially apparent among the women of the community who turn to each other against abusive men. Significantly, it is the women who are portrayed with any amount of depth in the narrative compared to the men in their lives. The belief in education is espoused by different women and is epitomised by

¹²² Jacobs, Elizabeth. *Mexican American Literature: The Politics of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
Date accessed: 13 Nov. 2012

<http://books.google.com.bd/books?id=V9y5L8EV50QC&pg=PA112&dq=the+house+on+mango+street+as+simulation&hl=en&sa=X&ei=CTiiUMK2D8PSrQflu4CwAQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=the%20house%20on%20mango%20street%20assimilation&f=false>

¹²³ Cisneros, *House* 108.

¹²⁴ Cisneros, *House* 110.

Cisneros's mother satisfaction in "Good lucky you studied"¹²⁵ in the "Introduction" when she visits Cisneros' house for the first time. Being an economic success is the necessary first step towards a complete self that relieves one from dependency on the men, which in this instance only brings regret to those women who have attempted this course of escape from Mango Street.

Cisneros notes the fragmentation that she has to deal with whilst growing up because "[w]hen she thinks in English, she knows she should've been on her own since eighteen" which makes it difficult for her to reconcile the dichotomous reality of her life in the States.¹²⁶ At the same time, there is resistance to assimilation in the vignettes that the narrator draws in *Mamacita's* story, who joins her husband in the States. Her refusal to participate in American life is registered by her self-imprisonment inside the house that her husband paints pink in memory of the home she left behind in the mother country and through her insistence on conversing in Spanish. In comparison, her infant son's acculturation is automatically triggered by the catchy television commercials. It is a struggle she is bound to fail since acclimatising to the new country will take place naturally for him – "No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English..."¹²⁷ The tyranny of her husband and the 'betrayal' of her little son who is just beginning to speak combine to make demands on her to accept that "We *are* home. This *is* home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English."¹²⁸ Thus, language becomes the site for contestation: fluency in English would facilitate assimilation while rejecting it in favour of Spanish

¹²⁵ Cisneros, *House* xxvii.

¹²⁶ Cisneros, *House* xiii.

¹²⁷ Cisneros, *House* 78.

¹²⁸ Cisneros, *House* 78.

diminishes her significance in the States. Her withdrawal from the world is noted in passing since she entombs herself in the act. Her refusal to learn/speak English becomes a political act, but her assertion is self-destructive. There is no attempt to return home because her husband's decision to pursue happiness in the Promised Land is final. Thus, ideas of repression and freedom to do with the community and the larger context of the States can change with a shift in the subject position depending on the implication of assimilation and what it can offer and how it can restrict the individual.

The images of isolation alternate with those of claustrophobia where the closely-knit community turns into a self-policing one. The pressure to integrate into the mainstream is offset by its attractiveness because it offers *laissez-faire* where the individual is released from cultural expectations by the choice to leave the community. The opposite is passivity. For second generation Chicanos, it is a life away from the vigilance of their own community where "you wouldn't have to worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway and nobody could make you sad and nobody would think you're strange because you like to dream and dream."¹²⁹ In order to do this, she needs to overcome the fear of the Other world that exists outside the terrain of the community that the women are protected from by their men. The emergence from the poverty and the rundown neighbourhood is charted through education and the acquisition of the quintessential house of the American Dream – "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from."¹³⁰ This is in keeping with the reading that Esperanza is given where she will have "a home in the heart".¹³¹ In this, Esperanza's mother constantly rallies for her to pursue higher education while emphasising her own

¹²⁹ Cisneros, *House* 83.

¹³⁰ Cisneros, *House* 87.

¹³¹ Cisneros, *House* 64.

weakness in opting out because of her shame at not having pretty clothes to wear to school. Thus, material wealth is a determiner when it comes to being part of the clique that will realise the American Dream. As in the Dream, the refrain in Esperanza's mother is to become somebody although the narrative cites a few incidents of women attempting to do so by getting married in a bid to escape. They are brow-beaten women seeking freedom from the community through marriage, but it only reinforces the structure by binding them in abusive relationships so that there is transition from one constricted life to another.

The sort of independence that Esperanza is able to create for herself is one-off because it offers her the space to move away by nurturing a life of the imagination. Even as she depends heavily on the market for her success, it is a markedly different form of happiness from that sought by the other women in the narrative, and rests on her recovery of those that she has to leave behind for the moment. In this, she is similar to Auma in *Dreams from My Father* where individualism does not entail the solipsism that American culture can be accused of propagating and condoning. In the three texts examined in this chapter, readers will see that America holds the position of the New World for those latter day immigrants who continue to go there in search of a new beginning from the 'Old World' as well as from those nations classified as the 'Third World'. Partaking of the benefits demand some amount of assimilation since one is meant to subscribe to a set of ethics pertaining to that locale. However, the demand for conformity is also contradictory as Gogol in *The Namesake* discovers when his racial profiling differentiates him from the WASPs because he hails from a less economically developed country. This places him at a disadvantage because he is positioned at the other end of the racial spectrum. This is primarily because the WASPs have been the predominant group to have

conceptualised the States by formulating it in their own image. When intermingling, Gogol's position is ascertained by the associations that the others have made with India; his racial background is a determiner because it localises him in the global context even as it makes demands on him to be transnational. Retaining the uniqueness of one's Other culture has been understood to hamper one's integration into the mainstream culture. However, in all three works considered, this concept stands on shaky grounds as a result of the characters' experience with integration and their struggle with maintaining only one identity. Trying to establish an American persona has meant that the other facets have had to be segregated and nullified. The narratives reveal that this would merely result in the projection of a set of values that are overblown into stereotypical proportions.

In a world of instable and multiple identities, one can spot the features of the postmodern response to uncertainty. It adopts a state of play where attempts at absolution are rejected by challenging the grand narratives. Thus, plurality and the constant shifts that the postmodern subject is in favour of would appear appropriate instead of the despair that marks the modern self questing for a specific solution. This is also a challenge to the conservative definition of the nation state as a homogenous unit because it belies the porous borderlines, the displacements whether voluntary or involuntary, the acculturation and the new movements that springs forth in response to the concerns voiced by that age, making new demands on its participants. In this context, 'acting' black or Indian or Chicano as opposed to 'acting' white underlines the performance aspect of identity. The recognition of this is in keeping with the postmodern dynamic persona that is constantly reforming itself into different states with a corresponding change in the determiners. bell hooks states that

The overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance. Racial postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc. that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy – ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition.¹³²

When the texts explored in this chapter are viewed in light of this statement, it becomes apparent that the protagonists are characterised by an internal quest for identity triggered by the impact of colonisation and their consequent life in a Diaspora typified by displacement and alienation from their environment. In some cases, the legacy of loss is passed on to every generation such that their experience of the world is in contradiction with their identity or any sense of belonging that they may concoct with the time spent there. In Barry's instance, the intrinsic contradiction of his birth makes him oscillate between the many identities that a well-travelled individual can possibly accumulate. This constitutes a major obstacle because the authenticity of their experiences is called into question, and they are belittled as a result by the differences created by the prejudices of race, class etc. It is believed that one is required to subscribe to the culture of one's ethnicity. However, the internal probing cannot yield a constructive solution because any disarray or overlap in identity is perceived to be disabling. However, Barry returns from Kenya as an individual with another layer of experience that enriches his understanding of his world and positions him in a globalised landscape.

¹³² hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness.: *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

The contradictory claims of America and India take the form of cultural assaults on Gogol. When he opts to be of the Indian immigrant population in America instead of an American sans affiliations to the mother country, he meets with disaster. This motivates his marriage with Moushumi and binds him permanently in the category of the Indian immigrant and with the Indian community. However, the failure of the marriage signifies the impossibility of choosing only one persona which causes further alienation and stultification because of the one-dimensionality of the resultant identity to the detriment of the individual. Esperanza forms the bridge between the multiple, seemingly mutually exclusive identities that Barry and Gogol toy with. She resolves the ensuing destabilisation by marking the seriousness of her position and her aspiration through the accomplishment of a house of her own and through her art which is based on her people. Like Barry, she is also a community organiser; however, her actions have less immediacy in the political sphere, but it is no less radical or relevant. Even as the narrative is replete with incidents of oppression, the flipside is that the narrator grows with each setback, and resolves to struggle against reactionary elements both within the community and without through her eventual return. The same return is envisaged by Barry in his decision to further his effectiveness through higher education in law school. Thus, social commitment is envisaged to be the answer. This can only come about as a result of one's acceptance of who s/he is as well as having the capacity to shift between the many identities that s/he can lay claim to.

Conclusion

All the texts that I have referred to in this paper are from different time periods. They are the creative output of writers concerned with identity. The idea was to write back with the aim of asserting their prerogative to their own narratives. This was in opposition to the way in which the Other communities were presented in the American metanarrative, which had Eurocentric leanings, as passive bodies who can only be studied to be understood. For these Other communities, finding their voice was an act of intervention where they tried to explore themselves through the written word. This also included the responsibility of arguing for the necessary steps that could be taken by a community to overcome its defilement under the imperialist gaze.

The African American community's continued residence in the United States required them to reformulate their identity with the emphasis on being American despite the difference that kept them at arm's length when it came to social interaction. The opening up of equal opportunities was envisioned through assimilation into the American middleclass. High entry barriers were erected so that only a few figures managed to do so like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey. Such success was perceived as ethnocide where cultural differences were eliminated or efforts were made to reduce their presence when they intermingled with white people.

In order to expunge the fear of the black body, blackness was redefined as American through a Christian identity, as attempted by the slave narrators, namely, Harriet Ann Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* and Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. The fact that this tendency was not time-specific is apparent in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

published in 1995, where Barry has the option of choosing between Islam and Christianity because of the interreligious marriage of his parents, alongside a range of social and cultural identities that were available to him which included American, African American, Indonesian and Kenyan. Initially Barry is sceptical about Christianity as an institutionalised religion. He sees it as a means by which the protests of the downtrodden were muffled – “I remained a reluctant skeptic [sic], doubtful of my own motives, wary of expedient conversion, having too many quarrels with God to accept a salvation too easily won.”¹³³ However, his transformation is spontaneous and elusive. It is during one of his visits to the church that the conversion takes place without any warning: “It was only as I thanked the boy [for the pocket tissue] that I felt the tears running down my cheeks.”¹³⁴ The incident takes the form of an inexplicable cathartic-like response to the primeval during a sermon. He answers to a powerful presence that was always there waiting for the errant soul in him to return seeking salvation. The conversion is a given, and any further scope for scrutiny is closed off. The ambivalent relation with the mainstream cannot be extended to God who reigns supreme.

Thus, the Christian religion and American cultural values are imperatives in the narratives that try to argue the case of the black individual. The creation of a black subjectivity for the African American was felt to be integral to the countermovement that would wrest the narrative voice of the Western observer, which had rendered them into objects to be studied. The black individual was ‘restored’ by granting him/her subjectivity. Thus, this token gesture was said to empower them to speak for themselves. The African American subject was consigned to the position of a native from Africa

¹³³ Obama, *Dreams* 287.

¹³⁴ Obama, *Dreams* 295.

rather than legitimising their place as American citizens because no amount of acculturation can lead to him/her achieving only an American identity. Thus, the study of the 'native' was a means by which the European sought to understand its colonised population by imposing his/her dominant discourse on the native's 'truths'. The same strategy was used with the enslaved population in America. Resistance to this interpretation was registered by the African American subject, beginning with the slave narrators, through a counter-narrative that subjectivised themselves in the written form. It contested the pro-slavery discourses by aiming to produce an 'authentic' narrative. Fanon, for instance, does this by asking "What does the black man want?"¹³⁵ Fanon gives the black man agency by allowing him to tell his own story. The chance to tell his/her own story needed the black subject to engage in soul-searching to find his/her true, 'authentic' voice that was unmingled with the white consciousness. However, the restoration of 'authenticity' through subjectivity was impossible because of the protean state of the African American's existence in a globalised world. This attempt at appropriation consequently returns the focus back towards the blackness of the subject's body. It was felt that the building of a black culture for the subject to fall back on was part of this remedy. Fanon explains that "Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect."¹³⁶ Thus, the silent presence of the white oppressor emanates from the concerns expressed regarding the state of the black community. The white individual invariably became the unacknowledged

¹³⁵ Fanon, Franz. "Introduction". *Black Skins, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967. 8.

¹³⁶ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* 10.

audience to the discussion of the black arts because “the black soul is a white man’s artefact.”¹³⁷

The Harlem Renaissance showcased the creative impulse in the black artists. Demands were made to write about life, to produce committed literature about the anxieties of black people. This tendency was problematised by Rey Chow’s essay “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” where she questions the typical stance in the anti-imperialist discourses to respond to the racist images and attitudes in the imperialist’s gaze with a counter-narrative that replicated it. Chow quotes Frederic Jameson’s “The visual is *essentially* pornographic. ... Pornographic films are ... only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body.”¹³⁸ She equates watching as an act of violence that pierces and defiles the body of the observed into an object. The act leaves the body devastated, rendering it into an image. In this instance, the body of the black subject becomes the site for contestation between the intellectual and the imperialist. Recuperation tended to return the oppressed black subject to his/her cultural specificity through a recovery of the past. However, the result is usually “a perfect symmetry between the imperialist and anti-imperialist gazes, which cross over the images of the [subject] ... as silent objects.”¹³⁹ The return of the African American subject to an ‘authentic’ state is also impossible because the endeavour to give him/her subjectivity and thereby humanise him/her is to remodel the individual through Anglo-American liberal humanism. Thus, the individual exists only as ‘they’ or they are redefined to become ‘like us’. The latter strategy entails a voice and a platform to speak

¹³⁷ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* 14.

¹³⁸ Chow, Rey. “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Ed. Angelika Bammer. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. 126.

¹³⁹ Chow, *Displacements* 136.

by remaking the subject in the image of the Self. Readers see Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* caught in this process where the nameless narrator's education and experiences in America makes him develop a persona that would be unthreatening to the white superior. This keeps him reiterating himself in the image of the white self. He does this by trying to become the ideal black man who will be able to take care for his people under the supervision of the Brotherhood; his role is, however, not one that he can fill with the ease of his white brothers. Nor is he given the chance to understand the way he gets entangled in the conspiracy within the Brotherhood towards the end of the narrative. Thus, his entire tenure at the Brotherhood is a period of bewilderment because he is never allowed to get to the core of the organisation that mobilises people to work for progress.

Chow notes that the true evidence of the victimisation of the individual resides in his/her silence, in his/her inability to neither talk about the violence nor prove it in any coherent form. Thus, Clifton's decision to leave the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man* and his reappearance as a peddler of the Sambo doll while he presents himself as a life-size version of the Sambo is an incident that the narrator cannot comprehend or sympathise with. Initially, the Invisible Man reacts with anger at the betrayal that he feels in Clifton's new avatar because it harks back to the past images of the black community that justified their enslavement. Already unintelligible, the narrator rejects it as an act of betrayal. When the Invisible Man witnesses the police brutality that ends Clifton's life, he comes to a gradual realisation of the hopelessness of his situation where Clifton's death is "a writing whose message is only understood retrospectively."¹⁴⁰ Chow agrees with Spivak's definition of the subaltern as someone who has no recourse to speech. Clifton's visibility and spotlight is backed by the powerful body of the Brotherhood, but at the end

¹⁴⁰ Chow, *Displacements* 132.

of his life, the Invisible Man watches him from a distance as he dances in the streets peddling Sambo dolls and is fatally shot as he avoids being apprehended by the police. The Invisible Man does not get the chance to question his actions and they remain unfathomable. Clifton's death may point to the meaninglessness of the claim of progress that is used to silence the need to address the problems that the black community continues to face. This is the life of absurdity lived by every black individual where even their enrolment in radical action to uplift their community meets with murky intentions that undoes the whole point of their agitation.

The Invisible Man tries to utilise the anger generated by Clifton's death to mobilise the community. While Clifton's actions elude an easy interpretation, the community cannot be organised by incoherent motivations and a disunited organisation. Clifton's actions seem so bizarre that they resist the attempt by the Invisible Man's narrative to depict Clifton as a black vanguard who died heroically. Any attempt to ascribe meaning to his actions in order to mobilise the community requires the narrator to hide the details of Clifton's new vocation as a peddler. The decision "to plunge"¹⁴¹ becomes an act of agency but it also comes at the cost of Clifton's self-annihilation. The essentialism that comes with the tag 'black arts' needs to be re-examined because it connotes a basic difference between the two groups. The arbitrariness of the binary does not receive the necessary highlight that it deserves so that it can be questioned and debunked as a construction. This harks back to the way in which the world is divided into 'first' and 'third' worlds, into the Self and the Other.

¹⁴¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man* 353.

The speeding up of the process of displacement coincided with technological reproduction. Chow quotes Hillis J. Miller to explain the impact that technological advancement had on the native's art: "[the] celebration of cultural specificity has occurred at a time when that specificity is being drastically altered by technological and other changes that are leading to [the] internationalization of art and culture generally."¹⁴²

The concept of cultural specificity has become increasingly redundant with globalisation and the increasing movement of people. It is in this context that we have writers like Barack Obama, Jhumpa Lahiri and Sandra Cisneros writing for a local audience in America as well as an international readership. Chow writes that the standardisation and mass production that came with modernism and technological advancement has meant that there is no way to locate the 'native' or the 'authentic' African American, which was what Chapter Two of my paper was concerned with. This is because the intellectuals concerned with anti-imperialist discourses believed that recuperation is possible only by returning the subject to his/her 'authentic' position. This task was taken on by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance when they tried to create the 'New Negro' by situating him/her geo-politically. This 'New Negro', however, is different from the 'authentic' black self that was brought to America in the form of the slave because s/he has had to make adjustments to his/her consciousness and behaviour in order to fit into the American landscape. Miller disputes the equation of the 'local' and the culturally specific as synonymous terms because it ignores the changes brought about by globalisation. One impact in particular is that of mass reproduction and the circulation of images by visual culture where the marginalised individual cannot help but lend him/herself to a certain amount of standardisation. S/he takes on the colour of his/her environment, and lets go of

¹⁴² Chow, *Displacements* 141.

the cultural specificity that the first generation of immigrants may cling to. This takes me to my argument for the postmodern perspective that characters view their shifting landscape with in Chapter Three. The subject experiments with play and constantly needs to change positions in order to maintain the multifaceted aspects of his/her life. The question of identity probed by the narrators in Chapter Three reflects on the capitalist society's consumption of ethnicity and difference as part of the latest fad in visual culture. The very popularity of Barack Obama or Jhumpa Lahiri in the worldwide market rests on their ability to reflect on issues pertaining to the cultural specificities that can still be found in a world with permeable borderlines, an intangible 'home' and the alienation and the dissatisfaction that anonymity, new spaces and cosmopolitanism can generate. These are questions that an increasing number of immigrants feel, and explains their need to absorb Americanism while balancing it with their other identities in order to create a life that is in sync with the country.

Meanwhile, the white observer is marked by the need to find the 'authentic' outsider who is different from the mimicry produced by the Westernised outsider. The reader sees this happening in the birthday party that the Ratliffs throw for Gogol. The people who attend the party in his honour find it difficult to place him in a completely American setup, and he finds himself struggling to differentiate himself from the native in India. The immigrant from India who adheres to his/her cultural affiliations despite the number of generations that have lived in the United States is easier to decipher and place than the Americanised Indian that Gogol is. This immigrant is defined as the outsider, and so instances of integration confuses the onlooker's sense of self because they define their own image by defining the outsider. This outsider and a white observer are differentiated through a lack, which allows those who are swayed by the imperialist's discourse to settle

into their easy position as the authentic American. Thus, the black American is 'located' only to return him/her to his/her African identity. Although Gogol and Barry have 'studied' to be American citizens, they are predominantly recognised by their Indian and African identities respectively.

While reading the narratives of Esperanza, Barry and Gogol, one can see that former ways of defining the different Other groups that make the United States are no longer applicable. These characters do not see themselves as non-American citizens. The earlier quest to categorise groups as the 'Other' was motivated by the white observer's desire to seek the 'native' that the individual was prior to the contact with the imperialist. The belief was that there is something more under the 'American' mask that the individual puts on during interactions with a white American. Chow states that the white onlooker insists on penetrating the façade and controlling the way in which the black subject presents him/herself. The two positions from which the intellectual-observer and the white imperialist-observer views the black subject – as the defiled object and as the civilised mask – locks the hyphenated American psyche within similar paradigms that are the construction of the observer. The politics of representation, however, reveals that as a group that had no say in the way they were dissected, the individual who is being studied is nowhere to be found in the diagnosis concocted. This is because "[w]here the [onlooker] undresses [the native], the native's nakedness stares back at him both as the defiled image of his creation *and* as the indifferent gaze that says, there was nothing – no secret – to be unveiled underneath my clothes. That secret was your *fantasm* [sic]."¹⁴³ [author's italics] Similarly, the postmodern individuals of the Diaspora in Chapter Three showcase the best way of negotiating with questions of identity. The play with revealing

¹⁴³ Chow, *Displacements* 143.

and concealing harks back to the arbitrary polarisation of the world into the East and the West. Attempts to forcefully interpret the signification of a particular activity or trait of the native/immigrant/outsider is allowed only to reveal that the observer's explanation could capture nothing of the actor's intentions except perhaps the former's own self-defining behaviour of fixing meaning without any conceptual understanding. Thus, in defining the native/outsider/immigrant, the onlooker only defines him/herself.

Finally, the moment of definition is replaced by a multiplicity of moments, each of which is equally true to the individual. Each text in Chapter Three reflects on the impossibility of finding a single source, an authenticity that would validate their experiences in light of everything that happens to them as they exist as semi-outcasts. Cisneros, Obama and Lahiri push the borders that demarcate conformity and contestation by taking the narrator to a realm of empowerment. They reveal that true power resides in defying categories. Similarly, Barry, Esperanza and Gogol realise that identity is the product of who one wishes to be. The notion of cultural specificity is debunked to reveal the need to expand the old definitions. This is done through the removal of categories when it comes to formulating oneself as everything and nothing. It is only by opening the borders between the Self and the Other that some semblance of oneness can be achieved. Thus, at the end of *Dreams from My Father* Barry reflects on the non-communication that kept his father and grandfather apart. This silence obstructed the possibility of conveying certain truths about themselves that was lost during the interference of the coloniser. The failure to re-establish contact between the two generations that witnessed massive changes in the African landscape, the status quo and the power play meant that the crucial legacy of wisdom that armed one with the tools to deal with a changing world could not be passed on. Barry rediscovers the lost message in his examination of the transition that takes

place between his father and his grandfather's life. He concludes that their stories pointed to the need to see the world in a different way – “this power could be absorbed only alongside a faith born out of hardship, a faith that wasn't new, that wasn't black or white or Christian or Muslim but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead – a faith in other people.”¹⁴⁴ This underlines the basic humanity in all as it recognises that the consciousness that is as primeval as the omnipresence of God Himself. In this instance, the difference between Kansas and Africa is not disabling; it does not call for an immediate need to study, consult and thereby create an interpretation, to render it accessible or to destroy its capacity for overturn the other's conception of the world, because it simply points to another way of accessing the events in the world without passing any value judgements.

¹⁴⁴ Obama, *Dreams* 429.

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