ABSTRACT

The genre, autobiography has been dominating African American literature since the eighteenth century. This literary form has provided a means of self-projection to the ethnic minorities of America and through it, they have asserted their rights to live and grow in America. While there are several outstanding works to picture the attitude of the Whites towards the African American, studies about the latter's attitude to the former are a few and far between. Hence, it is felt that a study to gauge the feelings of the coloured will be a small step towards rectifying this imbalance.

This thesis entitled, “Fact and Fiction: A Critical Study of the Autobiographies of James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright” analyses the following autobiographies: James Weldon Johnson’s Along This Way (1933) Claude McKay’s A Long Way From Home (1937), Langston Hughes’s The Big Sea (1940) and I Wonder As I Wander (1956), Richard Wright’s Black Boy (1940) and American Hunger (1944). The study tries to prove how in these self-portraits, the historical truth is moulded into interesting works of art, by maintaining a thin veil between fact and fiction. The present study consists of five chapters viz., 1. Introduction, 2. Dissociation of Sensibilities, 3. Post-colonialism: The unifying force, 4. Fact and Fiction: A Thin Veil and 5. Summing Up.
The introductory chapter begins with a review of the autobiography as a distinct literary genre and goes on to analyse the reasons for its popularity. It further points out the difference between the White autobiography and African American autobiography. The present study is then narrowed down to the African American autobiography. A brief survey of the Harlem Renaissance is undertaken, as there has a link been maintained between the personal self and the public society. Terms like 'African American', 'Negritude' have been defined and a brief survey of the major critical works on James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), Claude McKay (1890-1948), Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Richard Wright (1908-1960) has been attempted. The relevance, aims and objectives, scope and the methodology followed are also stated in this chapter.

The second chapter scrutinises the expression, "dissociation of sensibilities" and how it has been employed by the authors under consideration. It analyses how variety has been maintained by these writers in dealing with their personal lives as well as the issue of race. Hailing from varied family backgrounds, they adopted different kinds of narrative techniques to express their dismay as well as hopes. They portrayed their pitiable plight of their brethren as well as their own sorrowful state with varied emotions. While Wright and McKay gave out an anguished cry with utmost bitterness and anger, Hughes and Johnson maintained a balanced temperament and they found humour to be the best weapon to voice their feelings.
The next chapter analyses the relationship between the postcolonial theory and the African American autobiography. The concepts like individual fighting for the freedom of the entire race, double consciousness, education as a means of freedom and empowerment, resistance which carries with it ideas about freedom, identity and individuality have been advocated by the postcolonial theorists. Similarly these autobiographies under study have all these factors in common.

The penultimate chapter of the thesis explains the transformation of fact into fiction. Through these autobiographies the authors under study have shown evidence of their experiences as novelists. They have exposed their deep-rooted personalities through some of their fictional characters. But at the same time they have maintained a kind of "aesthetic distance" from their fictional characters. However there is a chance for them to reveal themselves from different angles. Writing from memory makes these autobiographies a process of creating and hence the factual events have been created with the fictional colouring. As a result, the margin between fiction and autobiography seems to be thinner. Viewed from the post-structural theory, all texts have ambiguity and so there is no possibility of a final and complete interpretation.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the study and shows how these autobiographies convey their oppressed situation both in converged and diverged way, by using the techniques and strategies found in fiction. Further it is stated that these writings as moral addresses paved way for other minority writings.