Abstract

Construction of identity is an imperative theme in literatures of the marginalized that tries to re-establish the vitality of the people in the periphery and seeks to erase all forms of oppression. Both African American and Dalit literatures are radical poetics and they consciously attempt to rediscover the lost identities of the race and the caste of the people concerned.

In the present dissertation, the researcher has attempted an in-depth study of two novelists, one belonging to the early movements of African American literature and the other Dalit literature in Tamil in order to understand and examine their unique treatment of the identity politics in their novels. A comparative study of these two authors, namely Claude McKay and Civakâmi, reveals their humanistic concern for the oppressed people and a redemptive vision for their liberation.

The first chapter, by way of introduction, discusses the prerequisites of the construction of identity and relates it to the racial and the caste identities of the African Americans and the Dalits. Since the present study tries to illustrate the complex themes of identity of the Blacks and the Dalits, the introductory chapter presents a general, but brief survey of The Harlem Renaissance in the U.S. and Dalit literary movements in India. It also introduces the two authors with a short note on their major writings and political commitments. This is made so as to provide a background to the understanding of the issues that cater to the thematic designs of the two novelists. Besides placing these two writers in the mainstream literature, it discusses the process of identity, the central theme of the dissertation.
The second chapter, "Realization of the Self" examines the various concepts of the self and relates them to the construction of the self in the novels of Claude McKay and Civakāmi. In this chapter, the researcher proceeds with the hypothesis that both African-American and Dalit literatures are political. The novelists under study portray the Blacks and the Dalits as the subjects of their own history. In this regard, it is argued that, at present, the history is not written by the conquerors but by the vanquished. Similarly, McKay's and Civakāmi's works attempt to regain the full human self-identity of the Blacks and the Dalits – not as the slaves made out by the tradition, but masters of their own destiny.

The third chapter entitled, "Negating the Other" maintains that identity is not a stasis but a process. It is not something autonomous, stable and independent of all external influences. The identities of the African-Americans and the Dalits in India are formed invariably in their reaction against the constructed otherness, the corresponding negative perception by the Whites in America and the high castes in India. This chapter elaborates the oppressed sects' negotiation and defence either in harmony with the external influences or in conflict with the differences that constitute the racial and casteistic otherness. Negating the other in both McKay's and Civakāmi's novels encompasses the encounters of the characters and, of course, the creators to overcome the rancorous oppression. In addition, this chapter points to the fact that the racial and the caste differences the Blacks and the Dalits confront prompt them to rediscover their identity by ultimately integrating with their respective collective cultural identity.
The fourth chapter entitled, "Re-integration with the Community", establishes the hypothesis that the oppressed people gain identity from opposing the oppressors. Going back to the native roots is not savagery but culture. In this regard, the researcher discusses the positive elements of the racial and the caste consciousness found in the novels. The novelists instil hope and pride among the characters and the readers by expressing their unshakable pride to be born Blacks and Dalits as well. This chapter upholds that the racial and caste identities are carefully constructed to rediscover their uniqueness and reassure their oneness with the community. It maintains that both McKay and Civakāmi in their novels advocate the return to native traditions and self-assertion as possible measures to regain the lost identities of Blacks and Dalits.

The last chapter sums up the identified process of the construction of identity, and provides a synoptic re-look at the cardinal features of the experiences of the oppressed. The study of the novels of McKay and Civakāmi reveals the common denominators – the self, the other and the community – which constitute the racial and the caste identity of African Americans and the Dalits. This chapter, a summation of all that has been discussed in the preceding chapters, establishes the hypothesis that the oppressed rediscover their identity by realizing the self, negating the other and re-integrating the dynamic self with the community. It also discusses the limitations of Dalit literature, a newly established genre in Tamil. The final chapter also includes a brief outline of further areas of research lying untrodden in the rich and resourceful African American and Dalit literatures.