Chapter - I

Introduction

Writing is not simply writing, it is an act, and in man's continual fight against evil, writing must be deliberately used as a weapon. It is necessary that he understands this (Sartre What is literature? 233).

Comparative Literature, being practised as an interdisciplinary subject, contributes towards achieving universal literature. As H.H. Remak in his "Comparative Literature: Its definitions and function" observes:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief such as (e.g.) painting, sculpture, architecture, music philosophy, history and the social sciences (e.g.) politics, economics, sociology, the sciences, religion, etc. on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (Stalknecht and Horst Frenz 1)

Comparative Literature again presupposes a comparison between two writers belonging to two different cultures writing in two different languages. It focuses on identifying similarities and universal values. Comparative literature as K. Chellappan, a veteran Indian comparatist in his article, "Unity in Diversity: A Comparative Study of Cankam and Japanese Haiku Poems" remarks:
Obviously, there is a silent secret bond between literatures, and comparative literature unravels this bond as well as attempts mutual illumination to each other. This would not only lead to an enhancement of literary appreciation and evaluation, but also to the discovery of literary Universals. (75)

Comparative Literature as a genre has now become multi-dimensional and pluralistic. Owing to Translation Studies, all significant literatures are available in all languages, making comparative studies of race and culture a distinct possibility.

The Blacks all over the world, whether in their native countries, or in the settled nations, are suppressed by the allegedly superior White society. The Blacks are the most anguished people in the world. Depending on the countries and cultural backgrounds, the oppression is crude or paradoxically sophisticated. The plight of the African Americans is deplorable in that they are uprooted by force from their native continent and transplanted in a foreign soil without any empathy. They live the hardest sort of life as resident aliens in White America. Like the African Americans, the Dalits – the black untouchables of India live in subhuman social existence and the caste supremacists subject them to all kinds of humiliation. The plight of the Dalits in India – particularly in Tamilnadu – is more pathetic and inhuman considering the fact that the Dalits are the natives and the Aryan oppressors, the outsiders.

The present thesis attempts to study the novels of Claude McKay and compare the sufferings of the African Americans with those of the Dalits in the novels of Civakāmi. The two writers belong to two different periods—Civakāmi is a
contemporary Dalit woman writer where as McKay lived and wrote during 1889-1948. The possibility of Civakāmi having read McKay is very remote – in fact, she has denied it in the interview with the researcher. Hence, this study is essentially a parallel study that compares the two writers whose unifying themes are suppression and revolt.

Identity crisis is a universal problem and any suppressed individual or community suffers from it. To escape from rootlessness and the agony of being an alien, one has to search for one’s own identity. The search for identity becomes the problem of a community as well. The thesis studies in detail how the identities of African Americans and the Dalits are constructed in the works of McKay and Civakāmi. The researcher is able to identify a pattern in their search for identity. Both the communities establish their identity – or at least move towards that in a typical pattern: Realization of the Self, Negating the Other and Re-integration with the Community.

Identity is an essential phenomenon in human life. It manifests itself in various socio-psychological dimensions. The quest for identity leads to a perception of oneself and preserves the inner worth and human dignity. On a broader level, the course of evolution and the history of any racial and ethnic group are characterized by how it forms and sustains its collective identity.

Identity is, basically, knowledge of oneself, an awareness of being and it involves the process of becoming. It represents one’s position in the society and it is mutually affected and influenced by the personal preferences and the social constraints. It is primarily inherent, often formed at will and altered by the person’s
interactions with the other members of the society and also by his / her personal
ambivalences. Hence, identity is always relational and continuous in process.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, describes
identity as

1. The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing
   is definitively recognizable or known;
2. The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an
   individual is recognizable as a member of a group.
3. The quality or condition of being the same as something else.
4. The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting
   entity; individuality. (Dictionary.com)

Identity of a person is always based on universally shared origin and his/her
experiences. The person, whose identity is in crisis, constructs or reconstructs
identity by realizing his/her self and its potentials and negating the constructed
otherness. Further, as Stuart Hall, a contemporary cultural theorist, in his article,
"The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity" observes, "Identity is a
structured representation, which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye
of the negative" (21).

Moreover, identity is partially based on the process of identification.
Identification is an important process in normal human behaviour and it is not
limited to childhood, nor is it simply a defence mechanism. Identification, as Soviet
psychologists A.V. Petrovsky and M.G. Yaroshevsky observe is, "always
understood as a process of comparison, collation of an object with another on the
basis of a particular sign or property resulting in the ascertainment of their similarity and dissimilarity” (CPD 132). All human beings identify with others out of anxiety, love, or simply in the course of self-development and normal social adjustment. Identity is formed and established either by the person’s assertion of what s/he is or the negation of what s/he is not. Cultural studies down the centuries by and large classify the awareness and assertion of the personal identity (what s/he is) as the self and the rejection of the differences (what s/he is not) as the other.

Besides, identity as a concept has achieved wide critical currency in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Philosophy and Cultural Studies. It has been increasingly used to refer to the social and historical composition of a person and his/her personality as a construct. It is conceived broadly in historical circumstances and recognised as a product of private and public histories. Identification is considered a richly psycho-social and personal-political process that insists on from being to becoming.

Race and ethnicity are intrinsically forms of social identity. The subject of identity, consequently, has been at the heart of both historical and contemporary discussions about ethno-racial issues. The question of identity has become a key word in contemporary politics and it has taken different connotations in psychology, sociology and literature.

Literature has always been concerned with questions of identity, and literary works provide with answers either implicitly or explicitly. The treatment of identity as a theme in literature is determined by the characters who struggle against or comply with social norms and expectations. Jonathan Culler in his book
Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction observes, "Literature has not only made identity as a theme; it has played a significant role in the construction of the identity of readers. [...] Literary works encourage identification with characters by showing things from their point of view"(114).

Identification, as a process in literature, plays a role in the production of group identities. In Culler's view:

For members of historically oppressed or marginalized groups, stories prompt identification with a potential group and work to make the group a group by showing them who or what they might be. Literature essentially suggests features of collective identity, reproaches social suppression and acknowledges the unique features of all cultures. (116)

David Theo Goldberg and John Solomons, in their general introduction to A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies state, "identity becomes hotly contested when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed and stable is placed in question and subjected to doubt and uncertainty"(6). They further stress that identity gives one a sense of personal location, and provides a stable core for one's individuality. It is also concerned with one's social relationship and complex involvement with others.

Identity is not imposed. It is chosen, consciously formed and actively used albeit within particular social contexts and constraints. Identification as a process involves both acceptance of external influences and rejection of the same. Against dominant representation of the differences, there is resistance. Within structures of
dominance, there is restrictive agency. An analysis of resistance and agency repoliticises relations between social groups, and draws attention to the central constituting factors of power in society. Hence, one’s identity necessarily defines one’s politics and there can be no politics until the subject has excavated or laid claim to one’s social identity.

Social identity, otherwise known as the collective identity, is not inherent. It is formed and transformed within and in relation to representation. Goldberg and Solomons view that collective identity is based on the process of memory, so that a group recognizes itself through its recollection of a common past (7). In this sense, many sociologists have seen the growth of identity politics as challenging cultural homogeneity and providing spaces for marginal groups to assert the legacy and importance of their respective voices and experiences. Hence, it is evident that identification as a process is a political strategy and that constructs specific racial and ethnic meanings through its respective politics.

In broad terms, the drive towards assertion of the identity of suppressed people and affirmation of it is characterized by a search for identity, which is positive and /or confrontational rather than tragic and victimized, as it had often been earlier. The experience of the African Americans and the Dalits in India are similar in that they try to assert and reclaim their cultural identity through their writings. The present dissertation makes an earnest attempt to read and rediscover the cultural identities as they are embodied in their respective literatures.

The term “African Americans” denotes a racial group in the United States whose dominant ancestry derives from sub-Saharan West Africa. Many African
Americans also claim to have European, Native American, or Asian ancestry. Different names have been used for African Americans at various points in history. Encarta Encyclopedia Deluxe 2003, published in three CD-ROMs by the Microsoft Corporation, describes the term, African Americans as follows:

African Americans have been referred to as *Negroes*, *coloured*, *blacks*, and *Afro-Americans*, as well as lesser-known terms, such as the 19th-century designation *Anglo-African*. The terms *Negro* and *coloured* are now rarely used. *African American*, *black*, and to a lesser extent *Afro-American*, are used interchangeably today. (Harris Encarta CD ROM)

African American history is intertwined with that of the Blacks in Latin America and the Caribbean. As slaves, they were considered the property of their owners and had no civil rights. In 1863, during the American Civil War (1861-1865), the U.S. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the Southern States. But, the Southerners quickly reversed these developments. Whites also began establishing a thorough system of segregation in the United States. Laws limiting the Blacks’ access to transportation, schools, restaurants, and other public facilities, were framed throughout the South.

Segregation was an attempt by the White Southerners to separate the races in every sphere of life and to achieve supremacy over the Blacks. It was often called the Jim Crow system, after a minstrel show character from the 1830s who was an old, crippled, black slave embodied negative stereotypes of the Blacks. As Finkelman records, “Segregation in the United States was earlier a
legal or social practice of separating people on the basis of their race or ethnicity" (Encarta CD ROM). At the beginning of the Civil War, the government refused to allow the Blacks to fight in the U. S. Army. However, in 1862 the U.S. government allowed the Blacks to enlist in segregated units, led by the white officers. By the end of the war, more than 200,000 Blacks had served in the U.S. Army and Navy. President Abraham Lincoln had publicly called for giving the vote to Black veterans; others in the Republican Party wanted to go further, and prohibit all racial discrimination in voting.

Although legal systems of segregation were not established in the North or West, informal segregation was enforced in both these regions. The Blacks reacted by forming the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910. African Americans also created an independent community and institutional life. They established schools, banks, newspapers, and small businesses to serve the needs of their community. But, in the South, segregation had the support of the legal system. In addition to the legal hindrance, there was always the threat of terrorist violence against the Blacks, who attempted to challenge or even question the established order. During Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Knights of the White Camellia, and other terrorist organizations murdered thousands of Blacks and some of their White supporters in order to prevent them from voting and participating in public life.

World War II provided the final impetus to the reinvigorated civil rights movement. The struggle against Nazism forced some Americans to reconsider the legitimacy of racism in the United States. The Holocaust and the murder of six
million Jews for their ethnicity led some Americans to realize that racism could be a threat to democracy itself. The Blacks also served in the military in unprecedented numbers. By the end of the War, many Blacks had served with the Whites in integrated units.

Moreover, the Roosevelt Administration prohibited segregation on all military bases, even in the South. The war experience taught many people that equality was possible. Following the war, black veterans returned with a new sense of purpose. Joining them in the struggle against segregation was a better educated and financially more secure black middle and working classes living in the North. Many Blacks earned high wages in war industries and became members of industrial unions. They also became politically active.

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that the single greatest issue of the 20th century would be the "color line." He was correct, both in terms of American domestic politics and also the events throughout the world. In 1905, a number of black activists led by Du Bois, the first Black to receive a doctoral degree from Harvard University, met in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada to device strategies to fight for racial equality. By 1909, the Niagara Movement as the group called itself led to the formation of NAACP, a racially integrated organization, dedicated to fighting segregation and inequality.

Politically and economically, the Blacks have made substantial strides in the post-civil rights era. The Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson, who ran for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988, brought unprecedented support and leverage to the Blacks in politics. In 1989, Virginia
became the first state in the U.S. history to elect a black governor, Douglas Wilder. Racial discrimination, at present, is illegal in the U.S. Yet, the African Americans were still to be freed of their sufferings. In 1991, the beating of an unarmed Black motorist, Rodney King, by four Los Angeles police officers was captured on videotape. An all-White jury later acquitted the police officers, which in its wake sparked off riots in Los Angeles and protests around the country. It evidences that despite the superficial claim of equality, racism is still a problem in America.

Apart from politics, the experiences of African Americans are also expressed in their language. Distinctive patterns of the uses of language among African Americans arose as creative responses to the hardships imposed on their community. Slave-owners often intentionally clubbed people, who spoke many different African languages to discourage communication in any language other than English on their plantations. Moreover, many Whites denied the Blacks to learn proper English. One response to these conditions was the development of pidgins, simplified mixtures of two or more languages that speakers of different languages could use to communicate with each other. Some of these Pidgins, eventually, became fully developed Creole languages spoken by certain groups as native languages. A significant number of people still speak some of these Creole languages, notably Gullah on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), also called Black English or Ebonics, is a dialect of English spoken by many African Americans that shares some features with Creole languages. (Harris Encarta CD ROM)
The creation of Pidgins and its conscious usage in communication do function as a defiance of the established traditions of the Whites. The literature—poetry, short stories, autobiographies, novels and plays—written by African Americans provides a unique window into the black experience. The growth of literacy rate among the Blacks and the publication of poetry and autobiographies demonstrated to people that the Blacks had the ability to create works of literary merit and achieve the same accomplishments as the Whites do. Lucy Terry, an African-born Rhode Island slave, who obtained her freedom in 1756, composed the first known poem by an African American. Terry’s poem, *Bars Fight*, which recounts a battle between Native Americans and the Whites in 1746, was preserved in oral form until its publication in 1855. In 1773, Phillis Wheatley, published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which became the first African American work of literature to gain wide currency.

Wheatley and other early African American writers focused on expressing Christian sentiments rather than proving the equality of the Blacks or ending slavery. However, by the late 18th century, African American authors increasingly used their poetry, fiction, and autobiographical works to attack slavery and inequality. In the 1840s, Frederick Douglass became a leading writer and abolitionist, campaigning tirelessly for the end of slavery and inequality in the United States. Douglass, who escaped slavery in Maryland in 1838, wrote three autobiographies namely, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892). Black writers, like William Wells Brown, William and Ellen
Craft, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth, narrated their own stories of enslavement and escape in their books and speeches.

Autobiography was the most popular form of African American literature during the 19th century. The Black writers recounted their lives in poetry and fiction. Poet George Moses Horton, a Virginia slave, wrote passionately of his desire for freedom in *The Hope of Liberty* (1829). William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853) was the first novel written by an African American author. Published in Britain in 1854, *Clotel* is a fictional account of the slave children allegedly fathered by the U.S. President Jefferson. Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), the first novel published in the United States by a Black woman, detailed the difficulties faced by the Northern free Blacks. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper published several volumes of poetry, novels, stories, essays, and letters that balanced her desire for artistic expression and commitment to abolition and women's rights.

Incidentally, the Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA], founded by Marcus Garvey in 1916, with the objective of "the general uplift of the Negro peoples of the world" organised an international convention in Harlem in 1920. It was a landmark in the struggle of African Americans, for it gave birth to a new resurgence— The Harlem Renaissance. With this Black Renaissance, the Blacks in America began to explore their "Native Art" with pride. This movement was also marked by a re-emergence of the pride of the Blacks in African heritage. In their attempt to claim racial equality and rediscover cultural identity, they launched the
movement. It was rebelliously an aesthetic exhibition of the African cultural
treasure to the Whites.

Harlem Renaissance had its epicentre in the Harlem neighbourhood of New
York City. Variously known as the New Negro Movement, the New Negro
Renaissance, and the Negro Renaissance, the movement emerged toward the end
of World War I in 1918, blossomed in the mid- to late 1920s, and then faded in the
mid-1930s. The Harlem Renaissance was such a powerful revelation that for the
first time the mainstream publishers and the critics were made to take African
American literature seriously. Although it was primarily a literary movement, it was
closely related to the cultural and political developments.

Several factors laid the groundwork for the movement. A Black middle class
had come into being by the turn of the century, largely fostered by the increased
education and employment opportunities that they gained following the American
Civil War (1861-1865). Equally important is the fact that during the 1910s, a new
political agenda advocating racial equality arose in the middle class African
American community. This agenda was also reflected in the efforts of Jamaican-
born Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey, whose “Back to Africa” movement inspired
racial pride among the Blacks in the United States.

In the early 1920s, three works signalled the new creative energy in African
American literature. McKay’s collection of poems, Harlem Shadows (1922), was
one of the first works by a Black writer to be published by mainstream national
publisher, Harcourt Brace and Company. Cane (1923), by Jean Toomer, was an
experimental novel that combined poetry and prose in documenting the life of the
American Blacks in the rural South and urban North. The first novel by writer and editor Jessie Fauset, *There Is Confusion* (1924), depicted middle-class life among the Black Americans from a woman’s perspective.

However, no single literary style or political ideology defined the Harlem Renaissance. The African Americans’ sense of taking part in a common endeavour and their commitment to giving artistic expression to their experiences united the writers of this movement. “Some common themes existed, such as an interest in the roots of the twentieth century African American experience in Africa and the American South, and a strong sense of racial pride and desire for social and political identity and equality” (Wintz *Encarta* CD ROM).

The diverse literary expressions of the Harlem Renaissance ranged from Langston Hughes’s weaving of the rhythms of African music into his poems of ghetto life, as in *The Weary Blues* (1926), to McKay’s use of the sonnet form as the vehicle for his impassioned poems attacking racial violence, as in “If We Must Die” (1919). McKay also presented glimpses of the glamour and grit of Harlem life in *Harlem Shadows*. Countee Cullen used both African and European images to explore the African roots of Black American life. In the poem “Heritage” (1925), Cullen discussed the problem of being both a Christian and an African, yet not belonging fully to either tradition. *Quicksand* (1928), a novel by Nella Larsen, offered a powerful psychological study of an African American woman’s loss of identity, while Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) used folk life of the Black rural South to create a brilliant study of race and gender in which a woman finds her true identity.
Ironically, the Renaissance relied heavily on White publishing houses and White-owned magazines. While most African American critics strongly supported the relationship, Du Bois and others were sharply critical and accused the Harlem Renaissance writers of reinforcing negative African American stereotypes. "Langston Hughes spoke for most of the writers and artists when he wrote in his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) that Black artists intended to express themselves freely, no matter what the black public or White public thought" (Wintz Encarta CD ROM).

African American musicians and other performers also played to mixed audiences. Harlem’s cabarets attracted both the Harlem residents and the White New Yorkers who sought Harlem nightlife. Harlem’s famous Cotton Club carried this to an extreme by providing Black entertainment exclusively for White audiences. Ultimately, the more successful Black musicians and entertainers, who appealed to the mainstream audience, moved their performances downtown.

The Harlem Renaissance changed forever the dynamics of African American art forms and literature in the United States. The writers of post Harlem Renaissance found that publishers and the public were more open to African American literature than they had been at the beginning of the century. Furthermore, the existence of a body of African American literature from the Renaissance inspired writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright to pursue literary careers in the late 1930s and the 1940s.
The outpouring of African American literature of the 1980s and 1990s by such writers as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison also had their roots in the writing of the Harlem Renaissance. The influence of this movement was not confined to the United States alone. Writers like McKay, Hughes, and Cullen, actor and musician Paul Robeson, dancer Josephine Baker, and others travelled to Europe and attained popularity abroad that surpassed what they achieved in the United States. South African writer Peter Abrahams cited his youthful discovery of the Harlem Renaissance anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), as the event that turned him toward a career as a writer (Wintz *Encarta* CD ROM). For thousands of the Blacks around the world, the Harlem Renaissance was a proof that the White race did not hold an exclusive monopoly on literature and culture.

In short, the Harlem Renaissance was a watershed in the upsurgence of a number of the Black artists. During the 19th century, the Black artists often depicted classical or biblical scenes, typically avoiding overtly African American themes. In contrast, the artists saw their heritage as an inspiration rather than a hindrance to their art. They increasingly depicted modern African Americans and incorporated influences from the varied artistic traditions of the African Continent. The features of the Harlem Renaissance are apparently present in McKay's writings.

Born in September 15, 1889, Festus Claudius McKay was the youngest of the eleven children of Thomas and Ann McKay. McKay was raised in the elements of the customs and traditions of the Ashanti, the West African people from whom he descended. *The Norton Anthology of African American*
Literature asserts: “Repeatedly sharing with his children the story of his own father's enslavement by the Whites, Thomas McKay sought to instil in his offspring a suspicion of the Whites that would become particularly evident in his son Claude's writing” (Gates 982). Other impressions from McKay's childhood that left an indelible mark on his literary productions include his profound respect for his community and religious scepticism. At seventeen, McKay received government sponsorship and at nineteen, he moved to Kingston, Jamaica's capital. There he served as a police constable for less than a year. He often considered the criminals as the victims of an unjust colonial order. This realisation led him to return to Clarendon Parish.

During the two years that followed, McKay was encouraged to write poetry in the Jamaican dialect by his mentor, Walter Jekyll, an English collector of island folklore with whom McKay had forged a close relationship. In 1912, Jekyll helped him to publish two books of poetry: Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads. Songs of Jamaica is primarily a celebration of the Jamaican peasants, with their relative freedom from bigotry. Constab Ballads centres more on Kingston and the contempt and exploitation encountered there by the dark-skinned Blacks at the hands of the Whites and the Mulattos. The books were respected enough for McKay to become the first Black to receive the medal of the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences, along with a substantial cash award.

McKay determined to use the prize money to finance for his education at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. But, he left Tuskegee in
frustration because of the local conditions two months after his arrival. He went on to study agricultural science for two years at Kansas State College before he decided to resume his career as a writer.

Supporting himself at first as a waiter and a porter, McKay familiarised himself with the New York literary circle. Such important White figures as the famed poet Edward Arlington Robinson and Waldo Frank, a Jewish radical novelist and cultural critic, soon befriended him. His first break came in 1917, when Frank published two of his sonnets, “The Harlem Dancer” and “Invocation”, in the December issue of The Seven Arts, a highly respected avant-garde magazine. Short story writer, Frank Harris published several of McKay's poems in Pearson. It has also made a major impression on the young poet. Unlike later Black writers, McKay did not rely primarily on such periodicals as the Crisis and the Opportunity as outlets for his verse. Though he wrote for the Black magazines on occasions, his most enduring literary ties were with the White publications, particularly with the leftist magazines based in Greenwich Village. Max Eastman published McKay's “The Dominant White” in the April 1919 issue of The Liberator and nine more of his poems in the July issue. McKay later served on Eastman's editorial staff, contributing essays, reviews and poetry.

In 1919, McKay travelled to England, where he met George Bernard Shaw and worked for a time under Sylvia Pankhurst. G. K. Ogden included of McKay's poems in the Summer 1920 issue of Cambridge Magazine. I.A. Richards wrote the preface for McKay's third book of verse, Spring in New
Hampshire. According to Richards, McKay's poetry was among "the best work that the present generation is producing in Great Britain" (qtd. in Gates 982).

In 1922, McKay published his most important collection of poems, Harlem Shadows. According to McKay, the book grew out of his urge to place the militant "If We Must Die", his most famous poem in it. However, the book marked the point that a Black writer's insights into matters of race could serve on more than an occasional basis as suitable subjects for poetry. During this period, sometimes he wrote under the pseudonym Ellie Edwards.

In 1923, in Moscow, McKay addressed the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. As the only Black poet, who attended the congress, he achieved instant popularity among the proletariat of the U.S.S.R. as well as with the officials of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, dismayed by the rigid ideological stance of the Communist Party concerning all artistic productions, and perhaps a little tired of being treated as a novelty in the Soviet Union, he left for a stay of several years in France. While in France, he produced his first novel, Home to Harlem (1928), and began to work on Banjo, which he completed during his travels in Spain and Morocco in 1929.

McKay's, Home to Harlem (1928), a vivid picture of the life in New York City after World War I, and Banjo (1929), set on the waterfront of Marseilles, are fictionalised autobiographies. Banana Bottom (1933), about Jamaica, is a revisit to his native tradition. McKay's poetry and prose are notable for his use of traditional forms to express themes of the Black identity and experiences in the United States. His autobiography, A Long Way from Home (1937), and a sociological study,
Harlem: Negro Metropolis (1940) also insist on the problems faced by the Blacks all over the world. In 1942, despite his free thinking earlier, he converted to Roman Catholicism and renounced his former left wing philosophy too.

When McKay died in 1948, the world lost the individual who, according to William Stanley Braithwaite, was possibly "the keystone of the new movement in racial poetic achievement"(Gates 983). Of McKay, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature records:

McKay was a worker for social change; and subtle though his poetry indisputably is on some levels, he believed strongly that too many black poets had hidden behind lofty standards of poetic refinement to keep from offending white readers. [...] He managed to use traditional poetic forms as satisfying vehicles for the expression of that impatience; [...] McKay was a courageous thinker and writer who prized his intimate knowledge of all classes of people. His work rings with an authority and authenticity matched by that of few of his contemporaries. (983)

The survey of African American society and culture explains the wretched predicaments of the Blacks and McKay’s active role in fighting against this social injustice. A similar survey on the Dalit movements in India with special reference to those in Tamilnadu and Civakami’s role in them will be useful here to provide a bird’s eye view on the plight of the Dalits in Tamilnadu. It also offers an insight into Civakami’s services both as a Dalit writer and an activist.
A unique feature of the Indian society is its composition, which is based on caste. According to the ancient Dharmashastras – religious texts of the Hindus – there were only four varnas – classes. The Brahmins were priests, the Kshatriyas, warriors, the Vaishyas, traders and the Shudras, skilled or unskilled labourers doing menial work.

Merriam-Webster’s Student Dictionary explains the word “caste” as follows: Etymologically it is derived from Portuguese casta that literally means race, and lineage, from casto meaning pure and chaste and from Latin castus:

1: one of the hereditary classes formerly dividing Hindu society
2a: a division of society based on differences of wealth, inherited rank, or occupation b: the position conferred by caste standing: prestige. (Britannica CD ROM)

The caste system of India is a rigid hierarchy of social classes that evolved from Hindu religious laws. The untouchables, the people who are considered to have no caste, often live in urban slums and have little access to health care, clean water, and other basic amenities. Although the Indian government has worked to improve their status, the Dalits continue to suffer discrimination and exploitation meted out to them by the high castes.

The Dalits are those who were referred to as the Chandalas, Ati shudras, Avarnas, Panchamas, Antayas and Antayavas in the Hindu religious scriptures:

They were ‘Broken men’ and ‘Protestant Hindus’ to Dr. Ambedkar and ‘Harijans’ to Gandhi. To the Britishers they were the ‘untouchables and depressed’ classes. They are referred to as the ‘scheduled castes’
in the constitution of India. ‘Dalit’ is a recent term adopted by the Dalits themselves to indicate the fact that they are the most oppressed, exploited and dehumanised section of Indian society.

(Massey People 81)

Ranked below the lowest caste were the people of no caste, the untouchables or Harijans, “People of God,” a term first used by the Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi. The Dalits traditionally performed tasks considered “polluting,” such as slaughtering animals or leatherworking. Physical contact with these people was viewed as defiling. The practice of labelling people untouchables was made illegal by India’s constitution, although the oppressed continue to face discrimination in getting work and housing. Today many untouchables prefer to be called Dalits.

As Arjun Dangle in his discourse on “Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future” points out, "the four castes - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras - came to be developed following particular conditions, the caste system and later the class systems were given religious sanction in the Hindu texts, which were written by the Brahmins" (Dangle 235). The texts emphasized that the class system was God-made and not man-made. The Brahmins spread the theory that they were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from the thighs and the Shudras from his feet. Hence, the Brahmins were the most superior, followed by the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. Theories such as this were put forth in the Rigveda, which was again claimed to be God-given.

In the Rigveda, which is supposed to be the oldest literary source available to the Indians, the famous Purusa hymn mentions the existence of four castes;
The Brahmin was his mouth,
Of both his arms was the Rajanya (Kshatriya) made,
His thighs became the Vaishya,
From his feet the Shudra was produced. (qtd. in Massey Hermeneutics 90)

The Chandogya Upanishad, not only refers to the first three upper castes, but also compares a Chandala, the out caste with a dog or a swine. The tenth Khanda, verse seven reads as follows:

Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here – the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the womb of Kshatriya, or the womb of a Vaishya. But, those who are of stinking conduct here – the prospect is indeed that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog or the womb of a swine or the womb of an out caste (Chandala). (qtd. in Massey Hermeneutics 91-92)

The Manusmriti -- the ordinances of Manu -- accepts only three "twice-born" castes - Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya - and the "once-born" Shudras. There is no fifth caste. To explain the existence of those, who were not of the four castes, Manusmriti puts forward the concept of "mixed castes", which included those born from inter-caste marriages: the anuloma – marriage between upper caste man and lower caste woman and pratiloma – marriage between lower caste man and upper caste woman. According to this principle, the offspring of pratiloma were considered the most degraded.
Consistent with *Manusmriti*, the most despised groups were *Chandala* – the offspring of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman – and *Sapaka* – the offspring of *Chandala* male and *Pukkara* female. Their fate was a cruel one. The plight of these groups is revealed in the following verse:

The dwelling of Chandalas and Cavpacas (sapaka) should be outside the village; they should be deprived of dishes; their property (consists of) dogs and ashes. Their clothes (should be) the garments of the dead; and their ornaments (should be) broken dishes, and they must constantly wander about. (*Manusmriti*, 10.51f qtd. in Das and Massey 20-21)

The social, political, economic and religious restrictions laid down by the Brahmins in their religious texts were implemented by the kings or the Kshatriyas. To follow the duties allotted to a particular caste in the texts became not only a religious obligation but also obedience to a royal order. In other words, as Dangle in his discourse on Dalit Literature observes, “religion and the state joined hands and bound the lowest class namely the shudras into mental, cultural and social slavery and later into untouchability” (235).

The living conditions and the plight of these oppressed were deplorable. They had no land to their possession, nor could they follow any fixed profession. They were engaged in menial works and the high castes treated them like animals. Disgraced like animals, they lived apart from the village meant for the high castes and they were forced to accept the leftover from the upper castes, in return for their endless toil. Suppressed further, their physical contact was said to "pollute" the
Upper Castes. Even their shadows were said to have the same effect. “Hindu religious texts forbade them to wear good clothes or ornaments or even foot wear and prescribed severe and humiliating punishment for violating these orders. Even for a basic necessity like water, they were helplessly dependent on the higher castes' good will” (Dangle 235).

As Dangle further records, the most perverted practice of untouchability was that at one time the upper castes compelled the Dalits to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sweat should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them (235-36).

It is obvious that the caste system in India was originally devised for exploitation. An exploiting system always adheres to a set of values, which is most favourable to it. The other systems of values are either distorted or corrupted for the convenience of the upper caste. Social inequality and untouchability were convenient, and they were indeed necessary to keep up the politics for the early rulers and were hence retained. With all these socio-cultural predicaments, the Dalits lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice and atrocities – practiced totally against humanity. Their wretchedness forced them to forget their own existence and they could hardly dream of freedom or independence.

The arrival of the British and their establishment of their colonies in India severely jolted the social system in India. They brought new knowledge, technology and production processes, which in turn led to industrialization in India.
Most importantly, as any sociologist will admit, a new codified legal system replaced the old one dominated by religious restrictions. With the introduction of English, Christianity and industrialization in India, human relations began to be examined in the light of new ethical values.

Further, a generation of social reformers came into being during the British rule. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's (1774-1833) eventful fight against child marriage and sati – the Hindu custom of burning a widow alive with the body of her husband – was significant, yet it was restricted only to the removal of the evils prevalent in the high caste society. Nonetheless, in Tamilnadu E.V.R. Periyar (1879-1973), a highly acclaimed social reformer fought against the superstition obtaining in Hindu religion, and the restrictions imposed on the untouchables. His "temple entry" movement in the 1950s was very vital in that it infused self-respect among the untouchables. His atheistic principles rocked the very roots of religion and they were successful in Tamilnadu to the extent that his followers like C.N. Annadurai (1909-1969) and M.Karunanidhi (1924 – ) became Chief Ministers in the religiously conservative India.

However, it is significant that the social reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1828-1890) and Dr. Bheemaraao Ram Ambedkar (1891-1956) who hailed from Maharasra examined Hindu religion ruthlessly and fiercely attacked those who supported caste superiority. They strongly maintained that the backward classes, the Dalits and the women in the country must be freed from slavery and be allowed to have a life of dignity.
The ideological war started by Periyar in Tamilnadu against the caste discrimination, superstitions so as to restore social justice and economic freedom created the congenial environment for the birth of Dalit Literature in Tamilnadu. Moreover, the birth centenary celebrations of Ambedkar, in 1991, gave a conducive ambiance to the Dalits to express their painful journey of life. The Marxist ideology, Periyar’s radical thinking and Ambedkar’s philosophy gave the impulsion to the writers to write on Dalit problems. Dalit literature in India, as a movement, says Dangle, “owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic changes. This literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people, who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality” (237).

In the second half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, Ayotitca Panțitar (1881) and Irattai Malai Cinivåcan, Dalit political leaders, organized the Dalits and created social awareness among them. Cinivåcan edited Dalit journals Pancaman in 1871 and Paraiyan in 1897. It was in the closing years of the 80s and 90s of the 20th century that Dalit literary writings came to be heard as the voice of an organised force in Tamilnadu.

Dalit literature is primarily a literature of protest and a demand of the oppressed for social equality. Dalit literature in Maharastra established itself as a distinct movement as early as 1960s and was far more powerful, influential and widespread than its counterparts in other languages, owing to the principles of their native reformers like Phule and Ambedkar.
Dalit literature in India, as a newly established political writing in the 20th century is not just the literature of a particular caste. As Dangle observes:

Dalit literature is one, which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. [...] Dalit means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country. (264-65)

Regarding the objectives of the Dalit writers, Sharat Chandra Muktibodh in his “What is Dalit Literature” asserts, “An original and important Dalit work of literature would emerge only when a Dalit point of view would visualize itself through concrete experiences. It will also prove to be deep and powerful picture of human life thirsty for freedom in the real sense” (Dangle 269).

Dalit literature in India in its essence is compared with the African American writings. Historically, the experiences undergone by the Blacks are similar to those of the Dalits in India. It is notable that the suppression of both the communities issues from the colour of their skin and physical traits. As many anthropologists observe, the Dalits were the original inhabitants of India and resemble the African in physical features. It is said that India and Africa were, formerly, one land mass until separated by the ocean. According to Ivan Van Sertima and Larry Williams:
Both the Africans and the Indian Untouchables and tribals had common ancestors. Some portion of these came to the Indus Valley civilization. These original inhabitants of India put up a strong fight against the Aryan invaders. However, the latter, working through deceitful means, defeated the innocent but hard-working original inhabitants, who had built the world's most ancient civilization in the Indus Valley. (qtd. in Rajshekar 43)

A comparative study of the African American and the Dalit literatures is bound to be highly rewarding. The examination of the kind of life the Blacks and the Dalits are subjected to in their respective countries, will open up new avenues of thinking. The Whites, from different regions of Europe went to America and established their colonies in search of an independent and prosperous life. Nevertheless, the Blacks did not go to America in pursuit of freedom and wealth. They were forcibly taken there and, in turn, America bestowed on them terrible slavery and colossal poverty. They had to abandon their language, culture, history, and on the whole their entire African legacy. They have been constantly living with a question "What is Africa to me?"

On the other hand, as Janardan Waghmare in his "Black Literature and Dalit Literature", points out that Indian Dalits have not arrived from a foreign country. They are not racially different from the majority of Indians. "It is not as if the language, religion, culture and history of others have been forced on [them]. In spite of all this, [They have] not held proprietary rights in this country, nor was [they] determined to be an 'owner' of the culture of this country" (Dangle 306).
The American Blacks and the Indian Dalits are members of the closed society in their respective countries. They have been victims of a peculiar class structure: the Black of racial discrimination and the Dalit of untouchability. In the history of the world, there is nothing to compare with the physical torture inflicted on the Blacks. The Whites tried to destroy the Blacks both physically and culturally to their advantages. The White organizations like Ku Klux Klan in the U.S. killed thousands of Blacks in the South, resulting in their migration to the North.

The plight of the Dalits in India is more or less similar to that of the African-Americans. It is true that they were not explicitly bought and sold like the Blacks. Their family system too has not been uprooted. Yet, the bonded labour system still prevailing in India makes the Dalits mute slaves of their masters. Deplorably, the bondage is extended to all the members of the family and it is hereditary. The ignorant Dalits are subjected to a great deal of socio-psychological torture to the extent that they become self-captives.

The Black life presented earlier in American literature was, as Waghmare proclaims, "a white mind in a black body" (Dangle 311). Later, the Harlem Renaissance paved ways for the Blacks to record their lives in literature by themselves. While drawing the similarities of Black and Dalit literatures Janardan Waghmare insists on the following:

i) Both Black and Dalit writers are in search of their respective identities.

ii) Experience in both literatures has surfaced from social life based on inequality.
iii) The literature of both is life oriented. Both Black and Dalit writers write from the awareness of social commitment.

iv) The literary language of both is the language of cultural revolt.

v) In both literatures, the aim is to find new cultural values.

(Dangle 313)

Apart from literature, the initiative to form the “Dalit Panther” movement to work for the political liberation of Dalits was taken up by Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar on July 9, 1972 in Bombay. As Massey underlines, the name of the organization was borrowed from the "Black Panther" movement of the U.S.A. (Massey Hermeneutics 98).

Though Dalit literature in Tamil as a movement was strongly influenced by Marathi Dalit literature, the Dalit themes were already found in the 12th century. As Arunan, in his book, Dalit Araciyal, Ilakkiyam (Dalit Politics and Literature) points out, "Cekkilar's Periyapurānam explicitly reflects the principles of Varna for the first time in Tamil literature" (9). Nantanar, one of the protagonists in Periyapurānam, a devotional literature, is a low caste devotee of Lord Shiva. His low born status does not permit him to enter into the temple. At last, as revealed in his epiphany, he plunges into fire hoping that his low born soul will be purified to sanctity. The death of Nantanar in this story symbolises that a Dalit devotee, despite his ardent faith in God, is never allowed to even glance at the sanctum sanctorum. Aruṇan emphasises,"Periyapurānam embellishes untouchability by giving puranic status to Nantanar story" (11).
It will be pertinent here to quote from S. Ravindranathan, when he makes a comparative study of the story of Nantan and the Ecstacy of Rita Joe:

It is only natural that the weaker are suppressed. It is a universal phenomenon that the weaker are controlled by the powerful. Both the Dalits and the Blacks, all over the world, are suppressed by the alleged superior culture and religion of their oppressors. In the case of Nantan it is Hinduism and Rita Joe it is the Christianity. (155)

Later, the Cittar (Ascetic) Literature, between 14th and 18th century, protested against the untouchability. Abitāna Cintāmani reveals that Civa Vākkiyar, an ascetic who married a tribal woman, voiced against untouchability. As Venkat Swaminathan declares, "Civa Vākkiyar denounced idol worship, temples, vedas, agamas and that go with it. He comes down heavily against caste structures and discriminatory practices" (17). Mukkutār Paḷḷu, in the 17th century is regarded as the first ever writing that depicts the life of the Dalits in Tamil literature. "It is against untouchability, and it centres on the people's life" (Aruṇan 12). The protagonist, a Pallar male mocks at the caste system as follows:

As I go near

They drive me away—Untouchable!

Hitherto, they eat

What I grow in fields. (qtd. in Aruṇan 12)

Gopala Krishna Bharathi, a Brahmin poet in the 19th century, rewrites Nantanar Puranam and attacks untouchability. It is echoed in the words of Nantanar's land lord as follows:
Pariah!
How dare you call!
Chidambaram, a Heaven
And willing to go . . . . ?
If you say so,
I will beat you and cut your wage. (qtd. in Arupan 13-14)

Subramaniya Bharati, in the 20th century attacked untouchability quite vehemently. A cosmopolitan in spirit, Bharati, the Indian freedom fighter writes,

Freedom to all,
To Pariah and to all the low borns,
The talented and the lawful
Will have immaculate knowledge and
Live in peace. (Bharati 30:56)

In the beginning of the 20th century an anonymous short story, presumably written by Matavayya, *Kannan Peruntatu* (Kannan's message) (1925) unravelled the miseries of the Dalits. In 1927, Kalki's *Vica Mantiram* (The Poisonous Mantra) satirised and ridiculed the old beliefs and their practitioners. Once, Dalit literature in Tamil was regarded as a literature written by the Dalits for the Dalits. Later, it has developed into a genre that speaks for all the oppressed including women and protests against all traditional social establishments. While doing so, Dalit literature consciously creates a counter culture and politics. Dalit writers make use of literature to express their sufferings, cultural exploitation and also their political positioning. The self-expressive writings by Pāmā, especially her novels *Karukku*
(1992) (The Spinous Petioles) and Cañkati (1994) (The Message) in Tamil, unravel the miseries of a Dalit woman in the Christian nunnery. In this sense, like any progressive literature, Dalit literature is also a cultural phenomenon that craves for social recognition for the Dalits.

Mukil in his "Tamilil Dalit Îlakkiyam" (Dalit literature in Tamil) summarises the objectives of Dalit literature as follows:

* To protest against casteism,
* To elaborate the problems of Dalits,
* To create Protest literature,
* To rouse strong political oppositions,
* To probe into the psychological dimension of oppression,
* To insist on economic equality,
* To bring out the Dalit sensibility in every man and thereby enable him to identify with the oppressed community,
* To be a part of Dalit freedom struggle. (Cuntaram 97)

Further, Mukil's observation on Dalit aesthetics insists on the following constituents:

* Subversion of the language,
* Creation of new myths,
* Violation against the traditions,
* Change in traditional narratology using Dalit dialect,
* Deliberate violation of all accepted norms and grammar,
* Extension of folk art and culture. (Cuntaram 102)
It is significant to note here that in the traditional Tamil literature, the Dalits were ironically portrayed as unhygienic, unlawful, sinning and immoral without attributing any social significance to them. They were pictured as those who never aspired for any progress in life. They were also portrayed as people, who cherished their slavery. However, with the advent of Dalit literature in Maharashtra and the birth centenary celebration of Ambedkar, the writers in Tamil energised themselves by writing a literature portraying the Dalits with pride and aggression.

Apart from Civakāmi, the writers, who are discussed below are considered to be the pioneers of Dalit literature in Tamil.

D. Celvarāj’s *Malarum Carukum* (The Flower and the Dry Leaf) published in 1966, marked the beginning of Dalit novels in Tamil. Aruṇān in his article, “Tamil Ilakkiyatil Tiṇṭamai” (Untouchability in Tamil Literature) observes that *Malarum Carukum* is a depiction of the cultural and generational changes, which bring in the social contradictions in the Dalit community (32).

Tamil Dalit fiction had its beginning with *Pancamar* (The Fifth Division of the Caste) *Kānal* (The Mirage), and *Aṭ imaikal* (Slaves) by a Sri Lankan Tamil writer Daniel. Pūmani’s *Piraku* (1979) (Afterwards) and *Vekkai* (1983) (The Heat) are said to have been the pioneer Dalit novels in Tamil literature.

Pāmā, a woman novelist and a short story writer, renounced her faith in Christianity. She elaborated her experience as a novice in the Christian convent in her novels *Karukku* (1992) and *Cankati* (1994). Her *Karukku* may be regarded as a female bildungsroman and it was well received in Tamilnadu. She won the Dalit Literary Award in 1992.
Vili. Pä. Itayavančan, (Appädurai) born in a scavenger family at Vilupuram, is a postgraduate in commerce and working in the municipal office at Vilupuram. He has published seven collections of short stories and two collections of poems. His maiden venture Nantanār Teru (Nantanar Street) (1991) disturbed the caste fanatics and it was considered as a milestone in Dalit literature and politics as well.

K.A. Gunacćkaran is a professor of Theatre Arts in Pondicherry University. His Musical collection Manucankatā (We are people too) was the first of its kind in Dalit art form. His play Pali Ātukal (Scapegoats) is considered to be a pioneer work in Dalit Theatre.

Rāj Kautaman, a lecturer by profession, is well known among the literary circle in Tamilnadu. As a journalist, renowned critic and columnist, he strives hard for the Dalit upliftment in Tamilnadu. His Dalit Panpātu (1993) (Dalit culture) and Dalit Pārvaiyil Tamil Panpātu (1994) (Tamil culture: A Dalit perspective) are the most celebrated books on the historiography of Dalit culture. His recent semi autobiographical writing, Ciluvai Rāj Caritiram (2003) is remarkable for its attack on Christianity.

Ravikumār, a bank employee, is an editor of a Dalit journal, Nirapirikai. His versatile genius in criticism, translation, theatre arts, music and mythology is seen in all his works. He is also known for subverting the Tamil literary canons and non-linear writings.
Apimâni (Mani) is an employee in Tuticorin Post Trust. His Nõkkâtu (1993) (The Pain), Panaimuni (1998) (The Imp) and Õrcõru (2003) (The Alms) are collections of short stories in which he unearths the sad plight of the Dalits in the Southern Districts of Tamilnadu.

Imaiyam in his novels Kõveru Kaluataïkal (1994) (The Mule) and Õrumukam, (1999) exposes the inner divisions and politics among the Dalits. Sritara Kânaçan, a writer groomed in the leftist ideologies, published his Uppu Vayal, (1995) (Salt pane) and won special approval from the serious readers. His Canti (The Street) and Vâŋkal (The Winnow), published in 2001 centre on his personal experiences and locate the problems of the Dalits in the waterfront Tutukuti (Tuticorin).

Civakâm was born on 17th June 1957 in Perambalur in Tamilnadu. She was one among the thirteen children of Palanimuttu and Tântâyi. After completing her education in Dominic High School, Perambalur, she joined Holy Cross College, Trichy to study B.A. History. There she proved her talents and excelled in all extra co-curricular activities like debate, writing short stories and essays. After her graduation, she joined Queen Mary's College, Chennai, for her master’s degree in History and she bagged the university gold medal. She passed Indian Civil services Exam and became an IAS Officer in 1980.

Civakâm is bucolic in spirit. During her school days, when she came home for holidays, she worked in the fields and collected firewood. She toiled in the paddy fields sowing seeds, planting seedlings, removing the weeds and reaping the harvest. Her experiences in the paddy field and her village are
deeply rooted in her psyche to the extent that her homespun experiences, constituted her writings later.

Even during her school days, creative writing was her strong forte. In the beginning, she dealt with general problems in her essays and then tried short stories. Her first short story appeared in a local daily and thereafter her writing blossomed slowly into a matured craft during her college days. Her avowed mission became a passion to write in order to negotiate with the cultural shackles and uplift her community.

Besides her flair for creative writing, her experiences as a Dalit and a woman form her realistic perceptions of life. Being a Dalit, she was humiliated in her school and college days. But, her resolute attitude prompted her to take all these humiliations into her stride. She proved her mettle by becoming the first Dalit woman IAS officer from Tamilnadu.

Her literary career started with the publication of the first short story collection *Ippajikkru Unkal EtartamuILLA* (Realistically yours) in 1987. After becoming an IAS officer, she published her first novel *Palaiyana Kalitalum* (The Old Order Changes) in 1989. It portrays the communal imbalances and the inferiorisation of Dalits. She published her second novel *Anantayi* in 1992 and it extensively unravels the miseries of the peasant woman in a feministic perspective. Her third novel *Pa Ka Â Ku* (1997), a Dalit metafiction, authenticates her objectives of writing the novel *Palaiyana Kalitalum*. Her fourth novel, in 1999, *Kurukku Vettu* (Cross-Section) is a psychological enquiry into the hypocrisy of Indian marriages. Expressing her political
commitment, as a Dalit Feminist, she has written more than thirty short stories and many critical articles. Her collections of short stories were published in three volumes namely Nāñum Totorum (1993) (Continues Still) Kataici Māntar (1997) (The last folks) and Kataikal (2003) (The Stories). She directed a parallel movie Útaka (Through). Having gained great acclaim, she, at present, is working on the film script of Ānantāyi. Ford Foundation in the U.S.A. has invited her to speak on the problems of Dalits. She, as a member of the Commission on the Atrocities of Women fights for the causes of women. She is translating her novels into English for Orient Longman. Her realistic presentations of the Dalit themes and characters with Dalit consciousness have made her one of the most committed writers in Dalit literature.

As an IAS officer, she has held various offices, of which, she likes her positions as Additional Collector and Project Officer, DANIDA Health Care Project, Additional Secretary, Labour, Managing Director, Director and Regional Director of Tourism and Secretary Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare the most. She has recently exhibited her dissatisfaction in an interview in Tirānati Jan. 2004 for not giving the highest portfolios like Home and Commerce to Dalit IAS officers in Tamilnadu so far (7). Her visit to many countries like Japan, Germany, Cambodia, Singapore, France, Vietnam, Malaysia, Poland, Thailand, Austria, Mauritius, Korea, South Africa, China, Kenya and Taiwan has provided her with rich experiences.

She is a regular contributor of a Dalit monthly journal, Putiya Kōtanki and as its name suggests the journal works hard to drive the casteist ghost away from the possessed. She is the Chairperson of the South Indian Dalit writers and Artists'
Association (SIDWAA), Tamilnadu Chapter and works for the development of Dalit literature and unity among the Dalit Writers and the Artists.

The quest for identity, as a major theme in both African American writing and Dalit literature, is politically motivated and it makes the authors politically committed to create a counter culture against their oppressors. With the proclamation of the Emancipation Act in 1863, millions of Black slaves in the U.S. were happy that they had been granted freedom of thought and speech. As a result, they related their inner most feelings and personal experiences more spiritedly and enthusiastically to the Whites' dislike. As Jean Paul Sartre, in his "Black Orpheus" rightly observes, "When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises?" (Bigsby 5). Sartre, further, asserts that the Blacks woke up to a realization of their being and he terms it as "an awakening to consciousness" (Bigsby 7).

African American literature is nostalgic in character and in general, it longs for the ancestral homeland - Africa - and its cultural heritage. As Jean Wagner in his, Black Poets of the United States underscores the African American literature "hope[s] for a future (which) is based on the rediscovery and the celebration of the race's past" (3).

Owing to the cultural dualism in America, the Blacks often find themselves stricken with an inner conflict, whether to accept or neglect the American culture. As Sartre observes, "He [the black] has become split and he no longer coincides with himself" (Bigsby 12).
The cultural divide and the inner conflicts of the Blacks prompt them to search for their lost identity to regain the vitality of the race. As Oladele Taiwa, a West African writer emphasises, "it was necessary for the black man to reassure himself of his pride in being black, because the blackness has become a shameful thing, an undignified state" (49). In this sense, the African American literature functions as a vehicle for transporting the Blacks from their self-captivity to self-assertion.

McKay's early involvement with race and colour problems and his participation in the International Negro Movements of the early 20th century leave their marks in his poetry and fiction. His total commitment to the problems faced by the African Americans makes him declare in his autobiography, *A Long way from Home*, "If I would not graduate as a bachelor of arts or science I would graduate as a poet" (4). True to his statement, he grooms himself as a spokesperson of the race and rediscovers the Black identity in his works. While delineating the Black life in America and Europe, he is, as Kenneth Ramchand views, "preoccupied with the place of the Negro in white civilization, takes the form of a celebration of Negro qualities on the one hand, and attacks upon the civilized white world on the other" (247).

McKay's three novels *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929) and *Banana Bottom* (1933) form a trilogy. A perceptive reader will notice the singular strain of thought that encompasses the three novels, namely, the quest for black identity. *HH* is a detailed account of the life of the Blacks in Harlem. *Banjo* in many aspects is a sequel to *HH*. As Arthur P. Davis points out
Banjo is "essentially Home to Harlem moved to the Ditch in Marseilles" (41). The theme of quest for identity is introduced in the first novel, heightened in the second, and achieved its climax and resolution in the third novel. While home and wholeness elude Ray in HH and Banjo, Bita in BB achieves them by her realization of her Black identity. Bita is firmly anchored in her community and reintegrated into her native culture.

McKay's design in his novels emphatically illustrates the question of the non-white outsiders' existence in an alien culture and focuses on their problems and privations. As one of the pioneers of the literary and cultural renaissance of the Blacks in America, McKay reveals his passionate gesture of identification with the Blacks in America. He epitomises the struggles and contradictions inherent in any oppressed group searching for self-reliance and respect. The present dissertation makes an earnest attempt to fix McKay as a writer, who defines identity politics through a tripartite: The Self, The Other and The Community.

Like McKay, Civakāmi is one of the pioneers, who depicts the agonizing Dalit life in Tamil literature. As Tamilavan in “Tamilil Dalit Ilakkiyam Varumā?” (Will there be Dalit literature in Tamil?) observes, "Dalit literature is not just literature. It is politics" (Cuntaram 3). True to this statement, Civakāmi in her writings places herself assertively in the identity politics.

Civakāmi is unique among the Dalit writers. She never hesitates to identify herself with the Dalits and speak for the oppressed against the establishments with which she is attached to as an IAS officer. Being politically motivated by her father
Palanimutu, a former Member of the Legislative Assembly of Tamilnadu, she continues her service for the downtrodden.

As a woman writer, she identifies herself first with women and then elaborates in her writings the social predicaments imposed on them. She emphasises that women and Dalits are born oppressed. Dalit literature aims at liberating both the women and the Dalits from their oppression. "It questions the cultural establishments that are against the Dalits. To say, Dalit literature itself is a voice of women against the decayed traditions" (Interview with the researcher).

It is worth recalling the views of Civakãmi on Dalit feminism. She asserts, "Feminism is a principle that helps transcend sex and gender differences and create an unbiased species without inequalities based on sex and gender - A New Species. In this attempt, feminism has to subvert the traditional notions of women" (Anbuchkaraci 12).

Civakãmi strikes a balance between the caste and the gender politics. In her discussion on “Women and Caste” at the Symposium on Dalit Feminism, held between October 3-5, 1997 at Dalit Resource Centre in Madurai, she proclaimed, "the caste system and the suppression of women in India have pushed the Dalits to unknown depths. The conceptualization of caste is patriarchal and hence it is against women" (Anbuchkaraci 62).

In addition to her feminist political commitments and views on caste, Civakãmi as a writer is progressive and modern. She is known for her non-linear writings and as a pioneer of Dalit literature in Tamil, she depicts objectively the
wretched life of the people, which has rarely been the subject matter in the traditional Tamil literature.

As McKay was criticised, for his HH, Civakämi was criticised for casting a Dalit politician and the Dalits' life in negative light in PK. She later changes her viewpoints in her metafiction, PKAK in which she illustrates her stance on caste and suppression through self-analysis.

Both McKay and Civakämi, as progressive writers, implant racial and caste pride in African-Americans and the Dalits respectively. McKay, as a chief exponent of the Harlem Renaissance, made use of his writings to decipher the labyrinthine ways of African-Americans' life and their culture. He also conceptualizes African-Americans, as he declares in Banjo, “a challenge rather than a problem of Western civilization” (273).

McKay’s HH, Banjo and BB portray the struggles of the displaced people and their attempt to counter the deracinating proclivity of the West. He also presents in his novels the effect of Imperialism and the Western civilization that invaded the private lives of the Africans to the extent of eclipsing their native values and cultural inheritance.

HH is divided into three major parts. In the first, Jacob Brown, familiarly known as Jake has deserted the White dominated U.S. army, returns to Harlem and picks up a ravishing brown prostitute Felice, who pleases him so much that he resolves to find her again. As Bernard W. Bell observes, “the search for Felice symbolises the sensual, joyous side of Harlem and provides the loose episodic structure of the narrative” (116). In the second part, McKay depicts the sensual
adventures of Jake and his Haitian friend Ray a cook and waiter on a Pullman train. The third section returns to Harlem, where Ray, in frustration with the evils of American civilization, ships out on a freighter for Europe, and Jake, reunited with Felice and to avoid arrest for War desertion departs for Chicago with Felice.

By presenting two opposite protagonists Jake and Ray, McKay in HH, highlights the conflict between instinct and intellect. Both Jake, the man of instinct, and Ray, the man of intellect, attempt to realise their dreams of social security and human dignity in a racist, parasitic and modern urban society in America. The uneducated Jake is in closer cultural and racial contact with his ethnic past than the Western educated Ray. The survival of both Jake and Ray as modern Blacks and their coping with the destructive Western civilization forms the matrix of the novel.

Banjo, as its sub title A Story without a Plot suggests, is reflective in narration. As an ideological novel, it rejects the White civilization and celebrates the Black folk values and cultural pluralism. The titular protagonist Lincoln Agrippa Daily familiarly known as Banjo represents the instinctive self of Jake in Banjo. He is a leader of five beach boys, who bum around together in the old port of Marseilles. Banjo aspires to form a Black orchestra with the Black outcasts Malty, Ginger, Dengel and Bugsy. They loaf on the beach, steal wine from casks, panhandle, sing and dance Dixie and Jazz in the streets and beg food from ships.

Ray who appears again in Banjo is still in search of his racial salvation. Banjo and Ray, like Jake and Ray in HH, experience similar conflicts in their response to Western civilization. Jake and Banjo's instinctual responses are given an intellectual interpretation by Ray in both the novels.
In *Banjo*, McKay expresses his views on dehumanizing Western education, civilization, sexuality and politics through Ray's lengthy eloquences. Towards the end, Ray joins Banjo in a vagabond life, because he persuades himself that he is very close to the beach boys in spirit. And, as he observes in *Banjo*, "they represented more than he or the cultured minority the irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race" (324). The novel, *Banjo* at last resolves Ray's cultural and sexual ambivalences too. In short, *Banjo* can be conceived as the novel of Ray's perception of race and growth to perfection by close association with instinctive Jake and Banjo.

Both *HH* and *Banjo* end with departures of exiles, whereas McKay's third novel *BB* begins with the return of a native. In *BB*, McKay achieves artistic maturity and consequently, it has a better plot, developed characters and, certainly, fresher scenes. As Tyron Tillery states, "It was [McKay's] last attempt to advance the theme he had unsuccessfully begun in *Home to Harlem* and carried through *Banjo*: that Western civilization was the Negro's cultural hell and should be rejected in favour of the simple values of folk" (129).

Tabitha Plant, familiarly known as Bita, a Jamaican peasant girl was raped at twelve by a twenty-five year old Crazy Bow. Subsequently, she was adopted by the Craigs – the white missionaries – and sent to Europe for education. Mrs. Priscilla Craig grooms Bita as an experiment of Western culture and education.

Bita's return to Jamaica after a number of years abroad sets the stage for McKay's contemplation on the cultural conflicts. Unable to bear the restraints of the Christian missionary, Bita realises to her bitterness that being civilized and
cultivated means living a life of repression and self-denial. Slowly Bita rebels against the values implanted in her by the Craigs and yields to the "folk" in her.

Bita's participation in Tea meetings and her love making with the native uneducated Hopping Dick symbolise the girl's will to change and her return to roots. Finally, Bita rejects the choice of Herald Newton, a clergy and decides to marry Jubban her father's drayman. Her marriage with Jubban at the end resolves all her cultural ambivalences and presumably, the conflicts dealt with in the previous novels.

Like McKay, Civakãmi in her twin Dalit novels Palaiyana Kalitalum (PK) (The old Order Changes) and Pa Ka Å Ku,(PKAK) an acronym for Palaiyana Kalitalum Äsiriyai Kuritu, meaning About the Author of Palaiyana Kalitalum, illustrates the miserable life of the Dalits. By presenting the characters, who are broken in the socio-religious sense, she expresses Dalit consciousness and their inner conflicts.

Civakãmi's PK, like McKay's HH and Banjo, presents two contrasting political characters Kättamuttu and Cantiran. Kättamuttu is cunning and communalises everything for his political interest. He is presented as the leader of the oppressed, and he fights for the rights of the Dalits and goes against the high castes' oppression in a shrewd manner. As a husband of two wives, he remains the unquestioned patriarch of the family. When Tañkam, a rape victim by a high caste Utaiyär seeks refuge in his house, he at first fights for her justice but keeps her as a captured bride, later.
Kăttamuttu's emotional and instinctive political ventures against the upper castes are put in sharp contrast with the emergence of Cantiran, a proletariat. Cantiran believes in rational and economic development of the Dalits in contrast to Kăttamuttu's emotionalisation of the issues.

Kauri, Kăttamuttu's daughter, like Ray in HH and Banjo, is educated and torn between her caste and education. The novel is written from her point of view, and Kauri like Ray in HH, at the end of the novel matures and remains accommodative by shedding her socio-cultural inhibitions.

PKAK is a metafiction that rewrites and re-examines the life presented in PK. It has originally been written as a serial in a Tamil daily Tinakaran, under the title Nānum Nānum (I and Me). When the present researcher in his discussion with the author expressed his interpretation of the title, Pa Ka Ā Ku as Paḷaiyaṇa Kalijitalum Asiriyai Kuritu (About the Author of Paḷaiyaṇa Kalijitalum) or Paḷaiyaṇa Kalijitalum Anatu Kuritu (The making of Paḷaiyaṇa Kalijitalum), she has accepted the views of the researcher in good spirit. At present, acknowledging the researcher's suggestion, she calls the book so. Criticised for her maiden venture PK, for exposing the Dalit leader in an unfitting manner and ridiculing his policies, Civakāmi reconstructs her views in PKAK by substituting materials from her own life.

PKAK, like Banjo, is reflective in narration and it conceptualises Dalithood by a series of queries by The Critic to The Novelist. Like Banjo, PKAK is self-expressive and Civakāmi, herself the protagonist, travels back to her past for a faithful presentation of the plights of the Dalits at present. PKAK is perceived as a
novel of maturation in which like Ray in *Banjo*, Civakāmi, the Kauri of *PK* in reality, resolves her self-denigration and asserts her caste identity rather proudly.

The present study, "Identity Re-Discovered: A Comparative Study of the Select Fiction of Claude McKay and Civakāmi" attempts to decipher the cultural identities of the oppressed in the novels. While examining the social constructs of the identity, the researcher has attempted to explain the construction of identity by analysing the roles of the self, the other and the community in the following chapters. Considering the societal consciousness of the oppressed communities, their sentiments, emotions, and quest for identity, the researcher attempts to explore the cultural identity by focusing on psychological, socio-historical and literary factors therein as in Analogical or Parallel studies in Comparative Literature.