

In search of elusive identities: A critical examination of the construction of Negro identities in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zora Nearle Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.



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DISSERTATION TOPIC

**In search of elusive identities: A critical examination of Negro identities in
James Weldon Johnson's *Ex Colored Man*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and
Zora Nearle Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.**

By

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Mrs C. Chimeura-Ndebele who has supported me both emotionally and financially throughout. I say, Thank you very much for everything may God continue to shower you with his blessings.

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on the construction of Negro identities in America as depicted in African American fiction. It explored and critically analysed the reasons to why Negro identities are complex and elusive in nature. The study looked at the challenges Negroes in post slavery America faced and how these challenges contributed in the construction of their identities. Among these challenges was racism and hatred towards African Americans by white America, moreover the contribution of slavery to these challenges. The study analysed both male and female Negro identities from the view point of male and female Negro writers so as to get an unbiased view. The study was carried out following the guidelines of the social identity theory which addresses the concerns of identity psychologically in relation to a social context. Conclusion was reached that although Negroes face numerous obstacles in the construction of their identities, they should continue the struggle to fight racism and be recognised as citizens of America.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.0 Area of Study

Identity is not static in one's life as it is always in the making; Hall (1996:3) argues that identification is a construction, a process never completed. Therefore the person who one is today is never the person they are tomorrow. This study will begin by noting that Negro identities are transitional, complex and elusive in nature, a factor that is a result of the traumatic experience under slavery.

Historically, Negroes suffered from the ills of slavery, oppression and discrimination in all spheres of life. All these negative forces were critical in shaping Negro identities. The construction and development of identity is a process that involves observation of oneself in a social context, therefore the black man is constantly trying to make sense of his existence and his identity in a white dominated society.

The history of African Americans shows that Negroes suffered discrimination and oppression which affected their self-esteem in the construction of their identities. This affected men and women as shall be examined in the selected primary texts to be analysed in this research. The Negro lives a double life which makes it difficult for him/her to attain an authentic identity. Fanon (1986:82) in his book Black Skin, White Masks in the chapter *The Fact of Blackness* says; "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man". The reason why Negroes have to live a double life is because they are forced to see themselves through the eyes of their white masters, they even live in such a way that confirm the white people's thoughts and myths about African Americans.

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Fanon (1986:82) also observes that the black man came into the world with the will to find meaning in things but only to find out that he/she was an object in the midst of other objects.

This assertion is the drive of this dissertation as it is necessary to know the reasons why the Negro felt as an object. This dissertation also seeks to understand the challenges faced by African Americans in the construction of their identities and unlock the elusiveness of their identities in a white dominated society.

Although critics have explored the subject of African American identities, their analysis did not seek to establish the elusiveness of the construction of Negro identities. Their exploration was mainly based on the wishes of the Negro man to be both black and American. This current endeavour is going to focus on both the challenges of Negro existence and the effect these had on the construction of their identities. The Study will also seek to find possible ways of finding answers on how best the Negro can construct their identities outside the reference points fostered on them by the white society. The fact that the Negro is struggling to construct his/her identity in a white community shows that there is need for further study on the topic.

1.1 Key Questions

- What is Identity?
- How did slavery contribute to the construction and development of Negro identities?
- What are the challenges faced by Negroes in the construction of their identities?
- What is the role played by the white community in the construction of Negro identities?
- To what extent were Negro identities shaped by the white community? And what is the effect of this?

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1.2 Justification of Study

Identities are dynamic in nature and therefore there is need to critically examine or scrutinise the construction and transformation of Negro identities. Identities are also transitional in nature therefore they are ever changing. It is therefore important to attempt understanding how they are apprehended in African American literary expressions so as to grasp their elusive nature. Arguments presented by scholars such as Du Bois (1903) and Fanon (1986) are valid. However, their analysis was mainly focused on the Negro's wishes to be identified as American and colored. Therefore this study is most appropriate as it will focus on the effects of these wishes when acted upon.

The research will also argue that Negroes face challenges in constructing their own identities in a world where they are made to see themselves through images created by Whites as shown in the fictional texts to be used in the research. This dissertation will engage in an ongoing conversation on the topic of Negro identities hence the study will also extend on previous studies on the subject.

The Negro was never allowed to discover and know himself but was made to see himself through the eyes of the other thus the white man. This forces the Negro to adopt a double personality. It is necessary to conduct this research as it will interrogate the elusive nature of Negro identities as expressed in African American texts. The research will also seek to show how African Americans within themselves contribute to oppressing each other's identities.

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1.3 Theoretical Framework

For a deep understanding of the elusive nature of Negro identities, it is critical to draw insights from a theory which would enable the "exploration of the concept of self in particular as well as the behaviours, perceptions and myths of Negro identities. Thus this dissertation will use the social identity theory.

Social identity theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. It was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination, therefore it is the most appropriate theory to use in this study as it is seen that discrimination is one of the barriers to the Negro's construction of self identity.

Hogg and Abrams (1988) define social identity as "A person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group" (p.18). They also went on to define a social group as "A set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category" (p18).

Hogg and Abrams (1988:225) assert that the social categories in which individuals place themselves are part of a structured society and exist only in relation to other contrasting categories, for instance black versus white; one has more power, prestige and status than the other. These scholars further point out that the social categories precede individuals, individuals are born into an already structured society. In other words people act in the context of a certain social structure.

In this social identity theory, a person does not have one personal self but rather several selves which means that a person can act differently according to the social environment they are at. This is what we see with African Americans at some instances. Social identity theory also

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states that an individual has multiple social identities and this is the case seen in the primary texts to be analysed in this research. The theory will help critically examine the effects of having multiple identities.

1.4 Research Methodologies

In carrying out this dissertation the researcher will use a qualitative approach. There will also be use of primary and secondary sources. The researcher will use textual analysis mostly as there is no need to carry out a field research. For analytical chapters the student will analyse different characters and their interactions with other groups in the chosen primary texts.

The chosen primary texts are James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of Ex-colored Man*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zora Nearle Hurston's *Their Eyes were watching God*. Since literature is a constructed reality, analysis of these works will aid the student with more information on the construction of Negro identities and the challenges faced. Insight will be gained as the chosen authors are African Americans who had the same experiences as members of their society, for instance James Weldon Johnson's text is an autobiography.

The student will also make use of historical material on slavery so as to understand how the ills of slavery affected Negro identities

1.5 Literature Review

Questions of identity are critical to the individual's self definite on as well as fostering a sense of belonging to a cultural group. Hall (1990:18) argues that identity is born as a problem, something one needs to do about as a task. Identity is transitional from birth till death; therefore

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Hall's argument is crucial to this study as questions of identity will always arise during the journey of one's self discovery.

This literature review will give different scholarly definitions on identity and critically analyse what other scholars say about the nature of identity, the construction and development of Negro identities in America and say why there is need for further study on the research topic. The review will also briefly give a historical account of the circumstances of the Negro people in America, which will to a certain extent show the elusiveness of the construction of Negro identities.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (8th edition) identity is the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. Goffman (1968:74) defines identity as positive marks and the unique combination of life history items that come to be attached to the individual. What Goffman is saying is that identity is about marks or pegs that each individual has and can use to distinguish themselves from the others. The Negro is in search of his identity pegs that can distinguish him from the others.

Hall (1990: 2) further defines cultural identity as that collective or true self hiding inside the many others, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves" which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging oneness or cultural belongingness underlying all the other superficial differences.

Hall's definition of cultural identity is vital to this research as it explains explicitly that cultural identity speaks of people with a shared history and ancestry. This therefore shows the importance for the Negroes to know their history and ancestry in order to guarantee cultural belongingness.

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There are many factors that influence one's identity and these include history, experiences, social environment and beliefs. There are different traits of identity which constitute together to form one's identity. However, this dissertation will focus more on cultural identity, racial identity, social identity, political identity, sexual and gender identity.

Hall (1990: 223) furthered his ideas by arguing that,

Actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.

What Hall is saying in this quotation is that identities are about knowing one's own history, language and culture. Furthermore identities are an ongoing process of the development of one's character and personality; he says that human beings always work on becoming better people to improve their identities in a certain way. How others represent a certain individual has a certain impact on how that individual will represent themselves. In context with this dissertation how the white community represent Negroes has a certain impact on how they the Negroes also see and represent themselves.

Hall goes on to say that identities are therefore constituted within and not outside representation. His argument is relevant to the critical examination of Negro identities as it can be noted that their identities were ever changing, a process of becoming a better person than they were yesterday. Identities are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

Dalal (2002:14), commenting on cultural identity, makes an important definition when he argued that;

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Negro cultural identity is a stereotype of the black person constructed in the mind of the white person and then forced back into the black person as the black historical subject.

Dalal's contribution is essential to this study as it shows clearly the complexity of the construction of Negro identities. Dalal in other words is saying Negroes were defined by white men, which is why the quest of their identities is an elusive one because they are who they did not want to be but had not much of a choice as they had to live in the shadows of white cultural constructions consciously or unconsciously. This dissertation therefore will seek to argue that the Negro race is faced with the mammoth challenge to disentangle themselves from white-created myths of who they are, and thereby construct their own identities.

Haralambos and Holborn (2004:818) define social identity as "Our social understanding of who we are and who other people are". This definition proves that society contributes in one's shaping and construction of their identity. It is vital to this research as it shows that the Negro society had a certain role to play in the development of the Negro's identity. On the other hand, gender identity refers to how an individual adapts the prescribed sex role to his or her individual identity. Sexual identity refers to how one thinks of oneself in terms of whom one is romantically and sexually attracted to. It will be argued in this study that Negro women during the slave era had no privilege to experience freedom of their sexuality, therefore they never knew what sexual or gender identity was.

As evidenced in Negro literary representations, African Americans went through many challenges during slavery which were not an easy load for any human being to carry and their challenges often deprived or robbed them of the chance to construct desirable identities.

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Washington (1901:3) in his autobiography *Up From Slavery* gives evidence of the challenges of Negro identities when he says;

Of my ancestry I know almost nothing. In the slave quarters, and even later, I heard whispered conversations among the coloured people of the tortures which the slaves, including, no doubt, my ancestors on my mother's side, suffered in the middle passage of the slave ship while being conveyed from Africa to America.

Washington goes on to say, "In the days of slavery not very much attention was given to family history and family records—that is, black family records," (p.3).

Washington's contribution is valid to this study as it gives a historical account of the circumstances of the Negro people in America. He explains how Negroes faced challenges of being tortured during the middle passage; women suffered rape as it was the order of the day and some even got pregnant out of it, bearing children of unknown white fathers. This kind of torture caused challenges to slave children for not knowing their cultural identity, specifically that of their genealogy of which it is an essential stage in the journey of beginning to construct one's identity. This fact underlies the elusiveness of Negro identities in the context of white dominated America.

Williams (1944) in his text *Capitalism and Slavery* describes Negro slavery as an economic activity where by Europeans used Africans for cheap labour to develop their continent by setting up large-scale plantations for different crops, especially sugar, cotton, rice and tobacco. Williams contends that the reason of the origin of slavery was economic and not racial. He explains that slavery brought up racism, arguing that;

Slavery was not born of racism,

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rather, racism was the consequence

of slavery....slavery had to do not with the color

of the labourer, but the cheapness of the labourer (p.65).

His contribution is necessary in this dissertation as it shows that slavery was for the economic development of Europe, and therefore Negroes would work in the plantations throughout the day without much of a social life. This was deliberately imposed in order to suppress Negro identity and avoid the feeling of belonging as this would cause slaves to rebel. Moreover, what Williams is saying is that racism was brought by slavery and therefore raising questions of racial identity.

As a race, African Americans amongst other things lost their black pride during slavery and in post-slavery America regaining that pride remained elusive as they were robbed of the chance to ever discover themselves and their identity as evidenced in Negro literary representations such as that of Washington mentioned earlier.

Slavery was a terrible circumstance where Negroes were dehumanised and desocialised as they were considered as chattel and treated like any other property.

Physically and psychologically African Americans had to understand that they were nothing else but slaves. Patterson (1982: 26) opines that;

Slavery is a system in which the master seeks to strip the slave of all kinship ties and social standing so that the slave is physically alive but socially dead, belonging to no recognised community and possessing no legitimate genealogy.

Patterson's submission is crucial to this study. This is so because genealogy is the first step to the beginning of the journey of understanding one's identity. For one to be able to identify who

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they are, they need to know and be able to trace their ancestry and be able to belong to a certain group of people.

The Negro's journey to construct and discover their identity is often an elusive task where one questions if they are a product of themselves or what their white masters perceive and wanted them to be. This forces the Negro to adopt a double or split personality as they do not know if they want to belong to the black or white community.

Du Bois (1903:9) says;

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the World and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

In other words Du Bois is saying that the Negro in the eyes of America is too inferior to contribute anything profound to their nation hence the statement that "...he would not Africanize America". Du Bois is also saying that the Negro wishes to be accepted as a citizen of America who has rights and full benefits of his/her nation however he also mentions that it is unfortunate that the Negro's skin colour is the barrier to attain his/her goals. Negroes in

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Americans face challenges of not being able to receive the same opportunities as the white Americans.

Another scholar, Frantz Fanon (1986:113) observes that the Negro does not wish to be identified as a black person but as a white person. This is so because white is associated with beauty, superiority, power and dignity, whereas being black is associated with ugliness, powerlessness, violence and everything else which is bad. Fanon (1986:113) asserted that "the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, and the Negro is ugly".

Du Bois argued that the African American wishes to make it possible to be both a Negro and American. However Fanon radically modifies this argument when he says that the black man does not wish to be identified as a black person but as a white person. Not only does the Negro person in America wish to be American by citizenship but to change his skin colour so as to match the societal standards of being identified as a human being with equal rights.

Arguments presented by Du Bois and Fanon are valid to this research. However, their analysis was mainly based on the Negro's wishes to be identified as an American and as a white person; therefore I am going to focus on the effects of these wishes when acted upon on the identity of a Negro man.

The Negro is in search of his/her original identity and in this difficult to attain task, the fact that being black is associated with ugliness and all bad things in life comes in the way of the Negro's effort for self discovery. Therefore at the end of the day it is possible to opt for being white to be accepted by the society, hence acquiring a double and split personality that translates into an identity crisis.

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Since this dissertation's focus is on the construction of Negro identities it is necessary to view the challenges that this race faced in developing who they are, the reasons and the effects of craving for whiteness instead of embracing their blackness.

Homi Bhabha in his collection of Essays *The Location Of Culture* (1994:4) is of the opinion that there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy". Bhabha's contribution is that it is possible for an individual to adopt more than two ethnic identities; hence this proves that the Negro could actually be black and white in his personality. His contribution also compliments that of Du Bois where he says the African American wishes to be both a Negro and American.

As mentioned earlier in this literature review, Hall(1990:2) made a profound contribution that identity is about becoming rather than being, hence it is always work in progress. This research seeks to engage in an on- going conversation about Negro identities, pointing out the struggles which Negroes face in the construction of their identities and that which makes it elusive and difficult to attain.

Hall (1990: 27) also argued that history and culture are vital in one's construction of identity.

This argument complements Fanon's assertion in Black Skin White Masks (1986:17) where he says;

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture.

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What Fanon means is that a person's language gives them a certain identity and culture. Since Hall mentioned that culture is vital in one's construction of identity, it therefore questions if the African American needs his or her own native language other than English so as to be able to fully identify who they are. This dissertation seeks to interrogate the implications of detonguing that the Negroes suffered due to slavery.

One thing which these two scholars have explored on is that cultural identity involves one's history, of which history is what the Negro is constantly in search of since his uprootment from the ancestral continent of Africa. Therefore the question becomes how does one identify who they are if they do not know their historical past and their genealogy? Such questions show that the Negro is in search of an elusive identity and this study will seek to answer such questions.

Hall (1987:2) says identity is a moveable feast which is formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in cultural systems which surround us. He goes on to say that identity is historical and not biological. What Hall means is that identity is never stationary but it is transformed continuously by the environment which surrounds us, hence showing the possibility of having many characteristics to form one's identity.

This dissertation will also focus on finding the answers to what the barriers to the construction of Negro political identities were. Clarke (2003: 38) states that Negroes want to hide from hatred and racism. This statement is valid as it is noted that racism and hatred are obstacles to individual identities. African Americans often had to gain certain societal standards of whiteness in order to be accepted.

Spivak (1988) in her essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" opines that by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate

In search of elusive identities: A critical examination of the construction of Negro identities in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. position in society. Therefore the Negro being a subaltern in search of his/her identity had to speak out through literary narratives in order to define themselves culturally, socially and politically.

Negroes often felt inferior as a race and this made it more difficult for them to discover their identities and recognise their potential of being seen as human beings in White dominated America. Grambs (1965:15) says; "The self esteem of the Negro is damaged by the overwhelming fact that the world he lives in says, "white is right and black is bad". The dissertation will seek to explore the elusive nature of the construction of Negro identities.

1.6 Chapter Delineation

This dissertation seeks to interrogate the elusive nature of Negro identities as expressed in African American literary texts. Chapter one of this dissertation is introductory and will focus on outlining the scope of the research. It includes the Area of study, Key questions, Justification, Theoretical framework, Research methodologies, Literature review and Chapter Delineation.

Chapter Two will analyse James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* under the title; **Exploring the politics of belonging in a culturally white dominated America**. The chapter also constitutes sub topics namely;

- **Race and belonging in America**
- **The Negro's Spiritual/cultural dilemma**
- **The Die is cast- Opting out**

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In Chapter Three of this dissertation, focus will be on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The chapter will seek to examine challenges faced by Negroes in their effort to negotiate for a socio-political space in race-conscious white America. The chapter will be titled; **The Quest for socio-political space in white America.**

Chapter Four titled; **Understanding Negro identities from a female perspective.** The dissertation will complicate the discussion on Negro identities by introducing a female perspective. Under the sub topics;

- **The construction of Negro women identities: The case of Janie**
- **Identity stereotypes : an obstacle to the construction of Negro identities**

Zora Nearle Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* will be analysed to give insights on Negro women identities and identity stereotypes. It will also look at challenges which Negro females face in marriages concerning their identity.

Chapter five will be the conclusion of this dissertation and will consist of the summary of the findings of the research and possible solutions.

With the aid of these fictional works the study will seek to explain and prove that inability to identify the self culturally, politically and sexually has certain implications on the way the Negro lives and also prove how the lack of these different traits of identification affects individuality, confidence and independence.

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CHAPTER TWO: Exploring the politics of belonging in a culturally white dominated

America

2.1 Introduction

Chapter one of this dissertation explained the area of study, justified it and also outlined the key questions that will guide this research. The chapter also reviewed relevant scholarly literature as a way to contextualize the discussion. The theoretical framework was also presented so as to show the theory that best describes why things are the way they are and why the chosen theory is suitable to use in this study. Methodology was also part of chapter one and it explained how the researcher is going to gather information and material to be used in the dissertation.

This current chapter will focus on James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in an attempt to explore the politics of belonging in a culturally white dominated America. The chapter will attempt to give an insight on the inner life of majority of African Americans and the race crisis.

The author of *An Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, James Johnson Weldon, is an African American writer. Johnson insisted that this novel even though it contains some places which he visited and activities which he partook like music, was not his autobiography but a fictional work. Initially Johnson had chosen anonymity of writing this novel to avoid any controversy that might endanger his diplomatic career. He was the first black executive secretary of the organization called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which advocated for civil rights for colored people.

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He was also an educator, lawyer, diplomat, songwriter, and civil rights activist. Johnson was involved in a literary movement of the nineteen twenties called the Harlem renaissance which advocated for the appreciation of everything black, for instance black literature and music as well as dance. The Harlem renaissance preached that black was beautiful.

The novel reveals issues of racial discrimination and politics of African American identities a few years after the civil war. Ex colored man, who is the narrator, like many other Negroes wishes it could be easy to be both a Negro and American.

Fanon (1986:113) argues that the Negro does not wish to be identified as a black person but as a white person. This is true as evidenced that the narrator lives his life as both a colored man and a white man and he manages to stay in the North as well as the South and this in turn helps him have different perspectives on racial issues. In the novel Ex-colored man faces challenges to accept his birthright as he in due course rejects his colored heritage and passes himself as a white man. This indeed shows that the Negro wants to be identified as a white person as Fanon argues. The autobiography paints the ridiculousness of racism and rather questions the existence of race as an identity category.

2.2 Race and Belonging in America

Historically Negroes suffered from the ills of slavery, oppression and discrimination. Some of the ills of slavery are mentioned by Washington (1903:3), where he says that when he was growing up he overheard whispered conversations among the colored people of the tortures which slaves suffered in the middle passage of the slave ship while being conveyed from Africa to America.

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Racially most slaves were Africans and this caused inferiority of black men and African culture, and thus racism can be viewed as historical and its rise increased due to slavery. Du Bois (1903:4) says; "...for the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line". Du Bois means that the racial problem is the core issue in the twentieth century America. The race issue goes hand in hand with the issue of belonging which is the central theme of Johnson's *An Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* where the narrator, who is a Negro, suffers an identity crisis. The narrator who is referred to as Ex-colored man arguably represents all the mulattos in America who face the dilemma and tragedy of not being able to identify either as black persons or white persons.

Ex-colored man is raised by one parent who is his mother due to the fact that his father is white and during that time white people are restricted from having intimate relations with black women, let alone start family with someone from the black race. One of the ills of slavery is that a number of the Negroes who belonged to the generation of Ex-colored man are off springs of rape and have white fathers whom they do not know and are not allowed to know by the American system at the time. This argument is supported by Washington (1903:3) where he says, "Of my ancestry I know almost nothing...". Moreover Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* gives evidence that his generation which includes that of Ex-colored man are off springs of rape. Douglass (1967:1) says that, his father was a white man as it was whispered that his master his father. It was whispered because at that time the Negroes were forbidden to know to whom they belong to in terms of parentage; this was meant to suppress the feeling of belonging.

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Ex-colored man grows up in the absence of a stable family unit, yet the family is the first critical stage of finding belonging. The family is the basic unity of a society which builds up characters and identities of individuals. It is of importance that individuals belong to a certain family which consists of the father, mother and the children. Ex-colored man's issue of belonging is questioned right from the beginning as he does not belong to a complete family institution which then affects his identity. Family is the foundation of one's identity and belonging and once that is destroyed or is not complete from the beginning it adversely affects the construction of one's identity. Washington (1903:3) mentions that during slave days not much attention was given to family history and black family records.

The reference to the narrator as Ex-colored man suggests that he does not have a real name to be identified with. Ex refers to something no longer needed, something which is history and regarded as baggage. This is how Negroes are seen and treated in post slavery America.

The narrator says; "I have a faint recollection of the place of my birth" (p.3). This in fact proves that he does not know his history and where he was born and this qualifies as part of the struggle and politics of belonging which Ex-colored man is grappling with throughout the novel. Moreover the fact that he does not know his place of birth nor his relatives raises the question, how then does one identify who they are if they do not know their history? Such questions show that the Negro is in search of an elusive identity and in particular Ex-colored man is in search of an elusive identity.

In the beginning the narrator is truly unaware of his racial identity. This is seen when he is fascinated by one of the "Nigger" boys who struck a boy with a slate and to which he reports to his mother about the incident. He is shocked and hurt by his mother's response when she restricts

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him of ever using the word Nigger and ever bothering colored students at school. At this point he is puzzled and does not understand that the only reason his mother is protecting the Negro children is that he himself is also regarded as a "Nigger".

It is only at the second incident that he questions about his racial identity where his school teacher asks all the white boys to stand up in class. When he stood along with the other white boys his teacher humiliates him and asks him to sit down and stand with the "others" later. It is then that Ex-colored man realises that there is something different about him and that he too could be a nigger. This shows racial discrimination in a white dominated America because the teacher could have simply asked all the students to rise at once without having to make them rise separately according to their skin color. The teacher represents the white community and this is proof that racism exists and is part of the politics of belonging as it is a barrier to the construction of Negro identities.

African Americans as a race are associated with ugliness and the entire animal-like behaviours one can imagine, where as the white race has the privilege of being associated with power, privilege, beauty, superiority and the entire good things one can imagine. The white race is the one which is regarded as human. These perceptions are the reason as to why most Negroes wish to be white so as to be regarded as human beings. This is authenticated by Grambs (1965:15) where he says; "The self esteem of the Negro is damaged by the overwhelming fact that the world he lives in says, "white is right and black is bad".

Ex-colored man is even afraid of what he refers to at the beginning of the novel as "a secret", it can be argued that the secret is his racial identity, he is afraid to face the reality of being black as

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he knows too that being black comes with certain consequences. This is evidenced where he says; "For an instant I was afraid to look, but when I did I looked long and earnestly" (p.12).

Ex-colored man questions his mother about his racial identity when he asks; "...Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?"(p.12). His mother's response in form of tears shows how she is afraid to tell her son that he is black as she knows the impact this will have on his life. It can be argued that the mother also wishes her son to belong to the white community so as to enjoy the pleasures which comes with being white.

She answers to her son saying; "No, my darling, you are not a nigger." She went on, "You are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger don't notice them" (p.13). This is evidence enough that Ex-colored man's mother like any other Negro of the time is ashamed of being black and wishes to be white. The narrator's mother does not make the struggle of unearthing his identity any easier as her answer brings more confusion to the narrator about his real identity and to where he belongs. To a certain extent Ex-colored man cannot be blamed for wishing to be white as he is only trying to escape the stigma and deprivations associated with being a man of color. The narrator is made to believe from a tender age that the white blood is the best and he grows up eager to reject the Negro blood in him. His mother says to him; "The best blood of the South is in you" (p.13). This of course means the white blood as his father is white. Fanon (1986) observes that the Negro wishes to be identified as a white person instead of black.

African Americans are trying to belong and fit in White America. However, during the process they develop double personalities of both black and white which make their lives difficult as one is supposed to belong to one particular group. Racism plays a role in the construction of Negro identities; it influences Ex-colored man's lifestyle from a tender age. At school other boys tease

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him about his skin color which affects his self esteem as a Negro boy and this highly contributes to the choices he makes in life such as that of posing as a white person. Ex-colored man exposes the lives of many Negroes in America and proves that people of color wish that being black could be evitable. The narrator realises that in an American society in everything the Negro was viewed as a man of color. Referring to the African American situation the narrator says;

He is forced to take his outlook on all things,
not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man,
nor even a human being, but from the viewpoint
of a colored man (p.14).

The American system exerts so much pressure on the colored man and as a result this affects his individuality and makes the construction of his own identity elusive. The colored man does not get the chance to discover himself on his own; instead he faces stigma, perceptions, myths and being labeled as bad all the time.

As Ex-colored man matured his questions on identity and belonging increased. This is seen where he observes that;

The older I grew the more thought I gave to the
question of my mother's position, and what
was our exact relation to the world in general (p.27).

This shows that the politics of belonging affected the narrator throughout his life like many other Negroes in America whose souls are troubled about who they are. At this point of his life he developed love for reading newspapers and other literature books to learn more about his race.

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Ex-colored man at one point develops a sense of pride in his racial identity. However, it is only because his friend Shiny has graduated and proved that colored people can also attain the same quality of education as the white students. The narrator says;

For days I could talk of nothing else with my mother except my ambitions to be a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race, and gain fame for myself (p.31).

It is later on revealed in the novel that the way the narrator felt about being black at Shiny's graduation was only temporary as he chooses to pass as a white man and even marries a white woman. This in fact shows that the issue of belonging in America is a complicated and elusive one because the narrator only wants to be white for material gain and to survive in America. He only wants to acknowledge that he is black when he realises that even when colored, one can achieve greatness and be successful. Even when the narrator arrives at Atlanta University he notices that there are African American professors.

Ex-colored man's behaviour about his racial identity fluctuates, at one moment he takes pride in being black and at another he prefers being white. The narrator however also criticises the white race for concentrating too much on the race question.

Ex-colored man believes that the race divide and the "Negro question" is ever present in America which to a certain extent is true. When at Jacksonville he comes to the realisation that the Negro struggle has shifted when he says;

The battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments

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of learning; and to-day it is being fought out over his

social recognition (p.51).

Arguably he is also referring to himself at this point as he is fighting for his social recognition.

The narrator is on a journey throughout the novel as he tours Europe with his millionaire friend who he plays music for at his private lavish parties or even just for him alone. Although his journeys with his rich friend were physical journeys to different places it can be argued that the narrator is on a journey of self discovery and racial identity. His journeys reveal that he longs for belonging for instance where he is thrilled that his friend treats him like he is white as he does not treat him like a servant but also buys him the same clothes as the ones which he wears too. This fascinates Ex-colored man and this fascination proves that he longed for belonging and at this point his friend gave him exactly that. The narrator through such incidents of enjoying being "white" complicates his racial identity and makes it more elusive.

Ex-colored man classifies blacks into three categories and it could be said that this distinguishes Negroes from each other. In these categories, Negroes, despite being of the same race belong to different classes of stratification. The narrator says there are those constituting what might be called the desperate class and he describes them as;

The men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps,
the ex-convicts, the bar-room loafers are all in this class...
for in numbers it is but a small proportion of the colored people,
but it often dominates public opinion concerning the whole race (p.53).

What Ex-colored man is saying is true of the Negro race, for it is judged according to the bad things which a few of them do and to the white men the Negro because of his race is seen as a potential rapist, a murderer and someone who has potential to commit

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crime. According to the social identity theory which is being applied in this study, individuals are born into an already structured society. "The whites regard them just about as a man would a vicious mule, a thing to be worked, driven and beaten, and killed for kicking" (p.53). This in fact is one of the reasons why the Negro is not proud of his skin color and in this case this is one of the reasons why the narrator prefers to associate with the white race. Fanon (1986:82) argues that the Negro felt like an object because of the way he was treated by America, whites treated blacks like vicious mules. The narrator says the second class comprises of the servants, the washer-women, the waiters, the cooks, the coachmen, and all who are connected with the whites by domestic service. Most of these African Americans started the domestic services during slavery and even after they were set free this class remained content with where they belonged. According to the narrator they are kind hearted, intensely religious and faithful (p.53). He also says this class is the connecting link between the two races, thus the blacks and whites.

The third class he said comprises of the independent workmen and tradesmen. This class proves the Negro's possibility to be satisfied with their skin color and not long to belong to the white race. Ex-colored man also acknowledges this where he says;

I concluded that if a colored man wanted to separate himself from his white neighbours he had but to acquire some money, education and culture, and to live in accordance (p.53).

This means that the Negro could only be recognised by whites if they attained the things mentioned above and live like whites. Education and money would help the Negro progress but as for culture this was not fair for the Negro as it would mean the rejection of his/her culture.

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2.3 The Negro's Spiritual/cultural dilemma

Negroes during the time of slavery had music and dance as their way of entertainment as well as a way to preserve their heritage and cultural identity. Music and dance in the African community plays a significant role in bringing people together. Even in post slavery America Negroes continued playing and developing their music into different musical genres such as jazz, blues and ragtime as it is seen in the novel under analysis that music played a dominant role in the narrator's life. Ex-colored man through music pursues his cultural identity. The narrator plays jazz which is a Negro musical genre; this is significant in his search for identity as it brings him closer to his cultural identity.

To escape from the race dilemma Ex-colored man manages to find solace in music. The narrator from a young age had always been interested in music. When he was twelve years old he received a piano as a gift from his father and this enhanced his love for music through playing the piano. He performed at his grammar school's graduation day and even as he grew older he continued with his music and playing musical instruments at concerts.

After losing his money in Atlanta where he was to attend university Ex-colored man moves to Jacksonville where he teaches music as a way of raising money for his upkeep. He chose teaching music because that is where his passion was. However it can be argued that the narrator's teaching of music is a way of trying to pursue his identity as a Negro. This is also supported by what he says regarding his teaching of music and attending church with colored people in Jacksonville;

This was really my entrance into the race. It was my initiation into what I have termed the freemasonry of the race. I had formulated

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a theory of what it was to be colored, now I was getting the practice (p.50).

Music surely was the narrator's entrance into the Negro race. However, he faces a dilemma when he leaves Jacksonville for New York after the factory he worked for shut down. In New York Ex-colored man meets his millionaire friend who tries by all means possible to convince him that belonging to the white race is much better than being a Negro. The millionaire hires him to play ragtime piano for guests at his lavish parties and to even play for him for his personal interests. The narrator continued playing music for his rich white friend while touring the world, travelling to different places in America and Europe. The narrator's spiritual/cultural dilemma is that he plays white music to please the white men's tastes thereby rejecting and shifting from his own Negro music. He does this because he is earning a lot of money for his job and he enjoys the good treatment he receives from his millionaire friend.

His spiritual/cultural dilemma haunts him when he wants to make a turning point in his life of whether to go back to the South to compose more Negro music or to continue living his life under the shadows of his millionaire friend playing white music. When his friend suggests they go to Egypt Ex-colored man turns his offer down and tells him he wants to go to the United States of America instead. The narrator had a good enough reason as he said; "...and I told him, as best I could, my dreams, my ambition, and my decision" (p.97). Ex-colored man's reasons show that a great part of him wanted to return to the Negro community and the millionaire's response complicates the narrator's decision, therefore proving the elusive nature of the construction of Negro identities. The millionaire in a long response says to the narrator;

My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes, a white man. Now why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people

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of the United States? Then look at the terrible handicap you are

placing on yourself by going home and working as a Negro

composer; you can never be able to get the hearing for your work

which it might deserve (p.97).

The white millionaire friend tries his level best to convince the narrator to either stay with him in Berlin or continue with his tours. This contributes to Ex-colored man's dilemma as he is no longer sure if he is making the right decision by wanting to go back to the Negro community when he is being told that Negroes do not have much for him in terms of his musical career. He himself even confirms that he was in a dilemma as he says; "For several weeks longer I was in a troubled state of mind" (p.99).

Referring to the United States not having much for the narrator to succeed the rich friend says;

I doubt that even a white musician of recognized ability could succeed there by working on the theory that American music should be based on Negro themes. Music is a universal art; anybody's music belongs to everybody; you can't limit it to race or country. Now, if you want to become a composer, why not stay right here in Europe?

I will put you under the best teachers on the continent. Then if you want to write music on Negro themes, why, go ahead and do it (p.97).

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Johnson is arguably using the character millionaire friend so as to bring out the trouble that African Americans had in the construction and development of their identities. Ex-colored man himself knew that the only way to sneak back into the Negro race was through music. He finally makes a decision to leave his millionaire friend for the United States and on his way there he meets a Negro physician who is a graduate from Howard University in Washington. This shows Ex-colored man the possibility of succeeding despite of one's skin color. The physician says to the narrator; "The Negro is progressing and that disproves all the arguments in the world that he is incapable of progress" (p.102). Nevertheless, as shall be seen in the subsequent section of this chapter, Ex-colored man still decides to pass as white stating many reasons of why being black is a disadvantage and is of inconvenience if one wants to survive in America.

2.3 The die is cast-Opting Out

As the novel progresses it is seen that the narrator opts out of the black race and wishes constantly to kill the black person in him. Hall (1990) made a profound contribution that identity is about becoming rather than being; identity according to Hall is work in progress. This explains the way Ex-colored man's behaviour about his racial identity fluctuates, at one moment he takes pride in being black and the other he prefers being white. He has many reasons of opting out and passing as white and one of these is the fact that the black race is a barrier to privileges and basic human rights America has to offer. He chooses to pose as a white person so as to be accepted by America and in order to survive. Ex-colored man chooses to pass as a white man so as to escape these pressures which come with being black. He has experienced both sides of the coin, thus

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being in the black community and in the white community, therefore he makes his decision based on his experiences.

Arguably by opting out he is creating more problems for himself as he will always have the Negro blood in him. When interrogating the Negro question with the physician on his way back to America, the physician argues that the Negro is progressing. However one can also argue that the Negro may be progressing but he still suffers double consciousness and somehow still struggles with the issue of race and belonging as evidenced in this novel through Ex-colored man's dilemma. This in fact helps grasp the elusive nature of Negro identities in white America.

One night in Macon the narrator witnesses a gang of white assailants burning a black man alive. This traumatizes Ex-colored man and causes him to distance himself from his race and chooses to pass as a white man. It is not all Negroes in America who choose to be regarded as white persons. However, those who choose to do so due to the fact that they want to survive in America, being seen and treated as human beings instead of second class citizens.

The United States contributes largely to the narrator's final decision as it puts a greater premium on race than upon anything else in the world. Du Bois (1903:4) also confirms this as he says that the problem in America is that of the color line. Furthermore this is proven when the narrator says;

Have a white skin, and all things else may be added unto you.

I have seen advertisements in newspapers for waiters, bell boys or elevator men, which read, "Light colored man wanted." It is this tremendous pressure which the sentiment of the country exerts that is operating on the race (p.104).

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Therefore Ex-colored man continues to pass as a white man when he marries a white woman and at the conclusion of the novel he is happy about his choice of passing as white as he says it is for his children's sake and he also says it because of his children that makes him proud of his choice.

The narrator rejects his heritage and race for material gain and life of earning money avoiding difficulties which come with being a Negro. However though he has chosen to be identified as white, the narrator shows regret about his decision beneath himself where he says;

I cannot repress the thought, that, after all,
i have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold
my birthright for a mess of pottage (p.143).

This proves the elusiveness of his identity, he chooses to be white but deep down inside he has self-regret and doubt about his decision of passing as white, he likens his decision to selling his birthright for a mess of pottage.

In conclusion one can argue that although the narrator has chosen to be regarded as white it is only the beginning of the politics of belonging as this becomes a subtle problem for all the African Americans who chose to be white as the black blood that flows through their veins will haunt them. The narrator's last statement shows self regret over the decision he has made, that of deserting his own birthright as a black man. The autobiography shows the difficult and elusiveness of attaining an identity.

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CHAPTER THREE: The Negro Quest for socio-political space in White America.

Chapter two of this dissertation critically analysed *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. The main thrust of the previous chapter was to explore the politics of belonging in a culturally white dominated America. Under different subtopics the chapter interrogated the Negroes' spiritual dilemma, racial discrimination in America and its effects among African Americans in the construction of their identities.

This current chapter will focus on *Invisible Man* and will interrogate challenges faced by Negroes in their search for socio-political space in white America. The chapter will also analyse what Negroes did to search for socio-political space in America and how they achieved it if at all they did. The issues raised in the novel will help understand the experiences and struggles which Negroes went through in an attempt to gain their individualities and construct their elusive identities socially as well as politically.

The author of the novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison, is a grandson of slaves and most of the issues raised in his novel relate to his life experiences. The places mentioned in the novel by the narrator happen to be the same places which the author had been to in his life. The novel is set during the days of Booker T. Washington's philosophy which advocated that Negroes after Emancipation should work towards economic success as a means of achieving racial equality. Washington also said that Negroes should not pursue their higher aspirations such as liberal education and political office before foundations of economic success were laid. He therefore formed Tuskegee institute where blacks attended the college for industrial education. In a way

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Ellison's novel is advocating against Washington's ideology and wants to prove that blacks are capable of being political leaders, he is claiming social and political space for Negroes although there are challenges along the way where whites are suppressing this quest.

The narrator who refers to himself as an invisible man begins the novel by explaining why he has decided to call himself an invisible man and that his invisibility is not a physical condition. He says he is not complaining nor protesting that he is an invisible man as he understands that he is invisible simply because people are unwilling and refuse to see him (p.3). Since literature is a constructed reality it could be said that the narrator represents all Negroes in America who after Emancipation still feel unrecognised by America and are fighting to be citizens with full human rights like the white Americans.

Fanon (1986:82) observes that the black man came into the world with the will to find meaning in things but only to find out that he/she was an object in the midst of other objects. This is true of the invisible man as his invisibility could be likened to the black man who recognised that he is treated like an object by white America. It could be argued that invisible man calls himself invisible as he also realises that America chooses to treat him like an object and not as a visible human being. His invisibility could also mean that Negroes feel identity-less in all sectors of life in White America especially socially and politically. African Americans during this period wish to participate in all civic processes of their country. However they are denied the chance to do so, hence questioning their identity as Americans.

The narrator reassures the readers that just because he is invisible it does not mean that he is dead. This is evidenced where he says;

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...it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation (p.5).

This could be interpreted to mean that the narrator is making a statement to reassure America of his quest for socio-political space. He is arguing that just because America refuses to see the Negro for his identity does not mean that he does not exist or that he is dead socially and politically. This also proves that he is determined to pursue being acknowledged and accepted by white America.

The narrator's invisibility is Janus faced as it could mean being disadvantaged and yet at the same time being a metaphor of freedom. A disadvantage because America refuses to see him and denies him the opportunity to occupy socio-political space and a metaphor of freedom because he dominates himself underground and has no rules to follow. The narrator says that his invisibility sometimes makes him behind and sometimes ahead in time and every other aspect of life, he says;

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind (p.7).

It is because of invisibility that the narrator is able to tell his story without being harassed white America. The narrator lives in a basement of an apartment which is strictly for white people. He says;

I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which I discovered when I was trying to escape in the night from Ras the Destroyer (p.5).

His invisibility is liberating him and giving him freedom because he is doing things that he could have not been able to do had he been visible, such as staying at a building which is strictly for

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whites and not paying rent. There were places where Negroes were forbidden to visit or stay as they were meant for whites only.

The narrator says he stays at the basement because he has been hiding from the world. The narrator hides from Ras the Exhorter and from the rest of the world. Clarke (2003:38) supports that Negroes are at a hide for he states that they want to hide from hatred and racism. The invisible man manipulates the states' resources by stealing electricity from the Monopolated Light and Power Company. He explains that stealing electricity makes him feel alive;

That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. I also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself. In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it (p.6).

This shows his determination to claim socio-political space in America; he wants to be recognised so he does so through stealing electricity and not paying for it. The electricity company is aware of this manipulation and its loss but cannot establish the identity of the person stealing the electricity. This is the narrator's way of fighting white America back; he uses his invisibility to his advantage as he knows that he will never be caught. He also says the reason he is manipulating electricity is for the time he used to pay a lot of money for it when he was working. It could be argued that the electricity company represents white America at large and the fact that they do not know who is misusing their resources shows the blindness of America which refuses to see the Negro as a human being. The invisible man misuses electricity and puts too much lighting, this could also mean that he wants to see and view his invisible self without a distraction from the outside world.

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The narrator confesses that he did not feel alive until he became invisible; this is evidence that his invisibility liberated him and freed him from the struggles he had to go through when he was visible some of which include fighting racial discrimination and not receiving equal rights with whites because of his skin colour. His invisibility constructed a new identity for him. *Invisible Man* is free at his space and does not have any limitations unlike if he had been visible.

The novel reveals how Negroes are affected by not being able to fully participate in their state's civic processes and that they somehow see their skin colour as a burden and a disadvantage in the construction of their identities. This notion is supported by Grambs (1965:15) who argues that the self esteem of the Negro is damaged by the overwhelming fact that the world he/she lives in says; "white is right and black is bad". The music which the narrator says he listens to on a radio-phonograph shows that his self-esteem is affected; this is proved by the song's title "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue" (p.6).

The title of the song could also pose as a question which African Americans ask themselves during the process of negotiating for socio-political space in white dominated America. It can be argued that this kind of question is posed during the hardships which Negroes face, specifically the hardships which the narrator faces in the novel in his quest for socio-political space.

The narrator tells his story of how he lived when "visible" in white America and how he ended up being invisible and underground. His experiences prove that African Americans were treated as puppets and therefore this made it difficult for them to gain equality when they were seen as nothing but animals, for instance in the novel the narrator is forced to fight a battle in a boxing ring against other young black men while they are all blindfolded. Even though the narrator is later on rewarded with a scholarship, this incident shows how Negroes had a long way to attain

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socio-political space in America. The blindfolds could mean that Negroes are kept in ignorance as to how the white system keeps them deprived and depraved in America. They are not recognised by the white community therefore they are as good as blind and invisible in the society. The blindness could also mean that the boys are confirming the stereotype Negro man as barbaric, savage, and violent. This is authenticated by Fanon(1986:82) who argues that Negroes live in such a way that confirm the white people's thoughts and myths about African Americans.

The generation of the narrator's grandfather, that of slaves, believed in doing everything to please the white men and this too could mean that their generation was too blind to fight for their identity. Patterson (1982:26) argues that slavery made sure that the slave was physically alive but socially dead and belonging to recognised community. This proves that Slavery made the Negro feel inferior to the white man. The generation of the narrator's grandfather wanted to pass on this inferiority to the generation of that of the narrator. However, the generation of the invisible man, the younger generation, wanted to reclaim their identity, and gain equality socially and politically. This is shown by the narrator's determination to be a better Negro in America, when he is in New York he tells Mary Rambo the landlady at an apartment where he is renting that when he left the South he wanted to be an educator but now he wants to be something else and is looking for greener pastures. The "something else" which the narrator refers to is arguably political office. Mary is a kind woman who encourages him to pursue his aspirations and she believes that the narrator will occupy a leadership role in the black community to improve their race, she says; "...well, whatever it is, I hope it's something that's a credit to the race" (p.197). The most important thing to improve the Negro race at that particular time was to gain socio-political space and equality in America and this is what Mary referred to.

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Social and political equality between the whites and blacks is something which the white community despised and was against. This was supported by Jim Crow Laws which were racial segregation laws. These laws separated Negroes and whites in all public facilities and spheres of life. The laws also disenfranchised blacks socially and politically and this was the greatest challenge which the Negro faced after gaining freedom and having been emancipated. The invisible man in the novel is told that he should remember his place always when he mentions "social responsibility and equality" (p.25). This just shows how blacks were pulled back whenever they thought of being at the same level with the white people in America. Moreover, this suppressed the real Negro identities; it suppressed the Negro's potential to be in the political office in America.

The narrator resists this social and political inequality and it could be argued that he represents all Negroes who are in quest in for socio-political space America. This is evidenced when in New York he makes a speech speaking out for an old couple about to be evicted at an apartment by white men. This is the narrator's way of resistance and refusal to conform with his grandfather's stereotype of being obedient to everything white men do or say despite the fact that it makes the Negro happy or not. During the couple's eviction the narrator says;

Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers! That's not the way.
We're law-abiding. We're a law-abiding people
and a slow-to-anger people (p.213).

The narrator is fighting for change and for Negroes to learn to refuse to accept being ill treated; his speech is his way of defying against Jim Crow Laws. He is showing his quest for socio-political space in America and his thirst to be recognised as a citizen. This is the time when the

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Negro is starting to realise himself and is fighting for his voice to be heard and for his identity to be constructed and developed as an American.

The narrator's grandfather lived at a time when everything a black man owned was owed to his/her slave master, a time when all Negroes could care about was to be good slaves to their masters despite the fact of being mistreated. The narrator's grandfather believes that Negroes should be obedient to the white man at all costs even if it means they have to pretend. These Negroes would do anything to please their masters and do almost anything which their masters wished for. It is this philosophy which grandfather wanted to pass to the younger generation. However, it could only work to a certain extent as the new Negro generation was striving for success, pursuing for higher education so as to redefine the Negro and erase the stereotypes of how a black man is supposed to behave. For instance the case of the couple's eviction and the narrator's speech proves to a greater extent that the Negro can succeed in claiming his socio-political space in America although it is through challenges such as risks to be lynched and arrested. It is possible to attain the narrator's quest because the old couple was then not evicted at the end of the day, however the narrator had to escape from the police as his speech was regarded as a crime. This shows how the invisible man is willing to gain social, political and racial equality in America but is faced with hindrances from the white race which then limits his successes and deprives his quest for socio-political space.

Some of the hindrances for instance include incidents which happened earlier in the novel, such as that of when the narrator gets to the prestigious black college he is asked to chauffeur a wealthy white trustee of the college called Mr. Norton. This shows how blacks were treated differently from the white people, the narrator like everyone else attended college to accomplish education however because of his skin colour his studies are distracted by his other job of driving around

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Mr. Norton. The fact that he is black automatically makes him inferior to the white people. This inferiority is one of the major challenges which Negroes faced when trying to clamor for socio-political space in America. No matter how intelligent one could have been their identity was disadvantaged by their race.

Dr. Bledsoe, who is the president at the narrator's college, is black but his ideas are similar to that of Washington who also believes that for blacks to fully attain success in America they should work in the industries and doing manual work. Dr Bledsoe has a mean character towards other blacks and he even encourages lynching of blacks. The narrator however says he wishes and hopes to attain what Dr. Bledsoe had achieved despite his skin colour. This is evidenced where the narrator describes Dr. Bledsoe saying;

He was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country, consulted in matters concerning race, a leader of his people... he had achieved power and authority...he had made himself of more importance in the world than most southern white men (p.79).

This explains the narrator's quest to be visible in his society and be identified as an American citizen. He works towards disregarding Washington's philosophy and to prove to Dr Bledsoe that other Negroes are capable of attaining what he has achieved if only they could be given the same opportunities as that of white persons.

Moreover the narrator represents the Negroes in America who are in search of their identities. This he proved when he is made spokesperson for a group called Brotherhood in Harlem whose motive in the novel is to fight for the rights of the social oppressed. Being a spokesperson means that one is speaking on behalf of the other therefore this validates that indeed the narrator was a voice for the Negro community. This also confirms Mary's beliefs that the narrator will become

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a leader in the black community. It could be said that Mary helps the narrator reconstruct and develop his identity in America through encouraging him.

Brother Jack a white man is the one who convinces the invisible man to be part of Brotherhood, he sees the potential in him of being a good speaker after he stood up earlier for the couple which was about to be evicted at an apartment. The white man says to the narrator,

We need a good speaker for this district.

Someone who can articulate the grievances of the people (p.227)

However the narrator is convinced that no one would listen to those grievances even if they were articulated hence he turns down the offer at first, Brother Jack tells the narrator that if he joins his organization and protest there are those who will hear their grievances and act.

It is ironical that a white man was the one concerned about improving the social and political status of the Negro in America whereas a Negro, Dr Bledsoe does not really care about the advancement of his own people. This show how there were some whites who were willing to help out Negroes to fully participate in America's civic processes, be recognised too as American citizens. Brother Jack confirms that the narrator was effective in helping out the old couple which is why he believes he can stand up for his people when he becomes part of Brotherhood organization. This is shown when he says;

You were very effective in helping them. I can't believe that you're such an individualist as you pretend. You appeared to be a man who knew his duty toward the people and performed it well. Whatever you think about it personally, you were a spokesman for your people and you have a duty to work in their interest (p.227)

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The narrator acts on Brother Jack's words and indeed becomes a spokesman for his race as he accepts the offer. This shows his willpower for becoming part of America socially and politically. He gives speeches in Harlem and creates for himself a reputable identity which embraces his culture and heritage thereby denying conforming to his grandfather's stereotype. The crowd loves the narrator and cheers for him during his speeches. When he has mastered the brotherhood principles and its program he is then appointed chief spokesperson for Harlem.

In one of his speeches the narrator speaks against blindness, mentioning that blindness in America is the root cause of inequality and racial division. The narrator says being spokesperson for Brotherhood makes him feel alive and human, he says;

I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand?
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! (p.268) .

Brotherhood organization helps the narrator discover that he enjoys being a public figure hence giving him more courage to prove his quest for socio-political space. He encourages other Negroes to gain confidence in them and stand up for their rights in America. The narrator provides evidence that he is in an expedition for socio-political space, he says to the crowd;

**SISTERS! BROTHERS! WE ARE THE TRUE PATRIOTS!
THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW'S WORLD! (p.268) .**

This shows the narrator's beliefs about being part of America and being noticed as a citizen too like whites. However the narrator had to learn new rhetoric for addressing the public and this assumed a new identity for him, he was taught the new rhetoric by Brother Hambro one of the men in the organization. This shows how determined the narrator was in doing all he could so as to win off his citizenship and that of other Negroes. On the other hand this means that Brotherhood wanted to really change the narrator's identity for him to fit in.

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There is a man who greatly contributes to the invisibility of the narrator who is called by the name Ras the Exhorter; he is a great opponent of Brotherhood organization and the narrator's work. Ras represents the Black Nationalist movement which is a promoter against white domination in America. However he acts the opposite to what he is supposed to be advocating for as he is one of the major obstacles which the narrator faces during his post as a spokesperson of Brotherhood in Harlem. Ras the exhorter turns the public against the narrator and encourages violence in Harlem which is what the narrator is also trying to speak against. When Tod Clifton dies, a former member of Brotherhood he is shot to death by a white man and this could be regarded as racial violence however Brotherhood does not pay much attention to his funeral and this is a wakeup call to the narrator as he realises that the organization does not have the same goals as he does. This just shows that Brotherhood organization is a fallacy for the black race for there will always be racial segregation between whites and blacks.

Ras turns the public against the narrator saying that the narrator betrayed the black race by holding a march against the death of Tod Clifton. The narrator ever since his decision to join Brotherhood was hoping for and working towards improving the black race and prove his space for socio-political space. Holding a march against the death of Clifton proves the narrator's fortitude for equality. One of the challenges he faces is that he is excluded in the organization's strategy meetings, however this is not new in the organization for in the past they had excluded some black members in the meetings therefore the blacks eventually left Brotherhood forever.

The narrator's determination to fight for socio-political space seems to be a threat to the White community and to those blacks who are convinced that blacks would never gain freedom in a white society. This is evidenced when the narrator as part of Brotherhood is reminded again

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through a letter from an anonymous person that he is black but in a White world. This was the challenge that Negroes had to face in trying to negotiate socio-political space in America. They are often reminded that they do not belong in America and therefore will never be equal to the white men. Moreover, this is the reason which pulls the black race back, it discourages the race to bloom and be as successful as white persons. The letter which was only addressed to as "Brother" read;

This is advice from a friend who has been watching you closely. Do not go too fast. Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of us and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a white man's world. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do. Be smart (p297).

This merely shows that in order for the black race to succeed in America they had to obey, and let the white men rule always. The letter reminded the invisible man that he should always stay at where the white man wants to see him at. Dalal (2002:14) states that Negro cultural identity is a stereotype of the black person constructed in the mind of the white person and then forced back into the black person. This simply acknowledges that Negroes are defined by white men.

The narrator realises the difficult of trying to fight the white system to gain socio-political equality, he also realises that he had to lose his individuality and conform to all Brotherhood ideologies even if he did not agree with all of them. Negroes had to adopt Washington's philosophy and that of grandfather of having two identities in order to survive. This was the main challenge which the young generation of the narrator faced, as they wanted to be part of America socially and politically so as to help other colored people to succeed and improve conditions for the next generations. The obstacle which this generation faces is that as they try to construct new

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Identities they are pulled down and this makes it difficult for them to prove that they are equal human beings as the white people. Hence this makes the construction of their identities elusive.

In conclusion; throughout the novel the narrator is battling with his invisibility and visibility, and when he tries to fight for racial, social and political equality and prove his identity he is pulled back. It is of significance to note that the narrator is faced with a dilemma of either agreeing with his grandfather's ideologies or becoming a new person. In order to escape this dilemma he has decided to stay an invisible man and be invisible to the world. The narrator remains puzzled about his identity. The narrator is forced to stay invisible and his identity is suppressed, his invisibility signifies the blindness of white America to recognise him and the other Negroes. Through his invisibility he can get away with a lot of mischief to get back to America for failing to acknowledge the Negroes presence in America however this does not affect white America a lot.

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Chapter Four: Understanding Negro identities from a female writer's perspective

4.1 Introduction

Chapter three of this study analysed Ellison's *Invisible man*. It interrogated challenges faced by African Americans in negotiating socio-political space in White America. The chapter also looked at the resistance strategies used by the narrator to be recognised in America socially, politically and racially. The thrust of the chapter was the Negro struggle in fighting for recognition in America and what it took for the Negro to succeed in this.

The current chapter will complicate the issue of Negro identities by bringing in a female perspective. The chapter focuses on Zora Nearle Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This chapter is divided into two parts; the first part is an analysis of the construction of Negro women's identities and will analyse the life of Janie, a Negro woman in the novel, who is in search of her identity. This section will look at the challenges Janie faces during the process of self discovery. The second part will attempt to understand African American identity stereotypes and how these affected Negroes in the construction and development of their identities.

The author Zora Nearle Hurston was born in 1891 and died in 1960. She is acknowledged by most black female writers as a literary mother. She attended Howard University where she spent most of her time writing. She began writing in the early 1920s and when Harlem Renaissance was at its peak, she was recognised as one of the pre-eminent black woman writers in the United States of America. Harlem Renaissance preached the advancement of Negroes and black pride

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therefore the timing was right for Hurston's career. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first published in 1937.

The novel's focus is on a Negro woman named Janie who is the main character. The novel is about Janie's quest for individuality and emancipation for her identity. The novel begins when Janie has just come back into town after burying her third and last husband who has just died. She is introduced to the readers through the narration of her life story which she tells to her friend Pheoby. At the age of sixteen Janie is caught by her grandmother kissing a boy named Johnny Taylor. This angers her grandmother such that she immediately marries Janie to an old man called Logan Killicks who owns sixty acres of land. Janie's marriage to Killicks is short lived as she runs away and marries her second husband called Joe Starks. When Starks dies, Janie marries yet again but this time around it is the love of her life Teacake.

4.2 The construction of Negro women identities: The case of Janie

Janie's identity from childhood is influenced and shaped by other people in her life. The novel shows Janie trying to break away from being defined by other people. However, she faces many obstacles along the way as she tries to construct and search for her identity. Janie's quest is to be herself, to be free from people's influences on who she is supposed to be and how she is supposed to behave. In the context of this dissertation one can argue that Janie represents Negro women who after the era of slavery want and try to break away from stereotype identities formed by the society on who the Negro woman should be. Janie is in a way fighting patriarchy and wants to be recognised for who she is. From the beginning and in due course Janie proves that identity formation is a process rather than static. Hall (1990:223) is of the same view as he argues that;

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Identity is a process of becoming rather than being:

“not who we are” or “where we come from” so much
as what we might become, how we have been represented and
how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.

Moreover social identity theory states that an individual has multiple social identities confirming that identity is not static. In terms of representation which is being mentioned by Hall, it shall be seen ultimately that Janie's pursuit for her identity is trying to deconstruct how she has been represented by others.

As a child Janie lived with her grandmother whom she referred to her as Nanny since the white folks whom she worked for called her nanny. Janie's journey to self discovery and search for her identity begins when she is a child. In her narration she recalls how until six years old she did not know that she was black until a man took a picture of her and it is when she saw the picture that she realised she is a dark little girl. She explains to Pheoby;

Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come long takin' pictures.....So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, “Where is me? Ah don't see me.” Everybody laughed.....Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said: “Aw, aw! Ah'm colored! (p.12).

Janie spent so much time with the white children so much that she thought that she was white. She went to school and played with white children although some of her friends laughed at her

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that she stays at Washburn's backyard. This affects the construction of her identity because she then feels that there is something wrong with being colored since she is being mocked. The formation of one's identity begins at birth and is a process throughout one's life time. Hall (1990:18) supports this argument as he is of the view that identity is born as a problem, something one needs to do about as a task. The effects of one thinking that they are white when they are Negro are usually seen as one grows up as they would expect to be treated like white folks in America and yet during the slavery era and part of the post slavery era blacks and white were clearly divided as the black race was regarded as inferior to the white race in all spheres of life. The white race was always the superior race.

Janie's grandmother played the role of Janie's parents in her life. This we hear when she explains to Pheoby how she did not know any of her parents and that she was raised by Nanny;

Ah ain't never seen mah papa. And ah didn't know 'im if
Ah did. Mah mama neither. She was gone from round dere
Long before Ah wuz big enough tuh know (p.11).

Parents always have a certain influence on how their children turn out to be; therefore Nanny had great influence on the construction of Janie's identity. This is evidenced by Janie's first marriage to Logan Killicks which is arranged by her grandmother. Janie does not get to fully experience her childhood and her teenage years as she is faced with the responsibility of marriage at a tender age of sixteen. Janie acknowledges that she was not a real woman yet to be faced with such a task of being married to a man who could be as old as her father, but when she tries to plead to her grandmother she refuses to hear out her opinion. Janie says to Nanny;

Naw Nanny, Ah aint no real woman yet...Me married? No ma'am!
Whut Ah know bout uh husband (p.17).

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Janie has the innocence of childhood and is not keen to get married. However, Nanny believes she is doing her a huge favour by marrying her off to a rich man who will leave behind the riches for her when he dies. Logan Killicks owns sixty acres of land which is paid for and this to Nanny means protection for her granddaughter, Nanny also says she is protecting Janie from men who will take advantage of her. She says this after she sees Johnny Taylor and Janie kissing. Nanny cannot be totally blamed for her actions as she belonged to the patriarchal era which believed that a woman can only be identified through her husband and that material gains mattered more than love. However the arranged marriage denies Janie an opportunity to discover her sexual identity. According to Haralambos and Holborn (2004:818) sexual identity refers to how one thinks of oneself in terms of who one is romantically and sexually attracted to. Her grandmother determines her sexual identity and it is this which Janie is trying to run away from.

Janie dislikes her first husband Killicks and describes him as "some ole skull head in de graveyard" (p.18). Janie strongly disapproves about this marriage. However, she gives in so as not to let down her grandmother. This proves that at that point she is not being herself as she is creating an identity to please her grandmother. Janie moves from her grandmother's house to her marital home. This shows how her identity was at first defined and shaped by her grandmother and now that she is married her identity is being defined by her husband who is controlling, commanding and always dominates her. This suppresses Janie's real identity as she is not happy in her marriage. Janie's marriage is intolerable because she simply does not love the man and the marriage was not out of her will, she allowed her grandmother to take control of her life and identify what kind of a woman she should be. Patriarchy is an obstacle to the construction of Negro women identities because it believes in women's submission to men and that a woman is

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better identified through her husband. Nanny wants Janie to live a life which she wishes she could have lived, that of being married and having a home. Nanny was raped and so was Leafy, Janie's mother, therefore Nanny believes that by marrying off Janie she is doing the right thing. According to Haralambos and Holborn's definition of sexual identity, it proves that Janie's grandmother was never privileged to discover her sexual identity as she was raped therefore this explains why she wants Janie to behave like her. However, Janie does not care about marriage like she does. Janie is not impressed by Killicks' material riches as what she really wants is true love and true happiness.

Janie tries to fight for herself in her marriage with Killicks. Killicks is too controlling. There is a point where Killicks demands that Janie helps him move some manure pile before the sun gets hot and Janie's response shows that she has it in her to fight for herself and for her individuality as she answers to him saying; "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine" (p.42).

Killicks harshly responds to her telling her she has got no place. He sees his wife as an object which he can toss and turn whenever he wishes to. He says to her; "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, dat quick."(p.42).

Janie endures being unhappy in her loveless marriage to Killicks until a man called Joe Starks comes into picture and promises to treat her well. Since Janie was unhappy with Killicks she saw Starks' appearance in her life as an opportunity to finally get true love and be happy. Janie decides to run away from Killicks and elope with Joe whom she marries right away. Hurston in a way is showing the possibility of escaping patriarchal system of arranged marriages and fighting

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for female individual identity. Janie's fleeing shows how determined she is to be herself and make her own decisions without influence from anyone.

Joe Starks impresses Janie with his sweet and convincing words such that Janie does not hesitate to marry him. Joe, who is also referred to as Jody, says to Janie;

De day you puts yo' hand in mine, Ah wouldn't let de sun go down on us single.

Ah'm uh man wid principles. You ain't never knowed what it was to be treated lak

a lady and Ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh. Call me Jody lak you do sometime. (p.39)

Janie is swept off her feet by Jody and she is excited to start a new life with her new husband. However, sooner than later she realises that her new marriage is of no help in trying to know her self and grow her identity. Her new marriage also turns out to be more or less the same as her marriage to Killicks as both men have similar characteristics. Joe Starks is controlling and domineering in Janie's life, making it more difficult for young Janie to be her true self. At this point it seems like Janie has once again given up on trying to discover her identity as she is living a life of pleasing Joe Starks by listening to what ever he instructs her to do and to be. This is similar to the time when Janie married Killicks only to please her grandmother Nanny. It seems her life is determined by the people around her and this does not make her happy.

Right from the time when Janie marries Joe Starks her identity is again modified to suit her new husband. This is shown by the fact that Joe buys her new clothes which are elite and suitable enough to please him. Just like her previous husband Logan, Jody reforms his new wife into what he wants her to be of which the transformation has nothing to do with true love as it turns out Janie is just a trophy wife for a wealthy and popular man like him. Jody does not want an equal partner in marriage but someone he can control and take charge of, and to him Janie is a

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perfect candidate for the position. He does not want Janie to make her own statement about herself and show her individual identity. This is evidenced during the opening of Joe's store and when he is elected Mayor, the residents ask Janie to make a speech as she now is the mayor's wife. However, her husband quickly responds saying it is not Janie's place to make a speech and she is not fit to make a speech. He says;

Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-making. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat She's uh woman and her place is in de home (p.57).

Joe in this event proves that he believes the husband is the spokesperson of the wife and he is the one who makes final decisions without hearing the wife's view. Jody does not bother consulting Janie if she would like to make a speech or not, instead he makes the decision on his own thus suppressing Janie's emotions and individuality. Janie remains silent, respecting her husband's decision although it does not really make her happy. It is apparent that Negro women face challenges in the construction of their identities especially those who are married like Janie whose voices are suppressed. Using Janie's story as a case study it is clear that Negro women identities are elusive.

Janie tells her husband that, the fact that he is mayor puts them in strain as he will always be busy with his work. However, Jody does not consider Janie's point at all as he tells her that; "Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (p.61). This is not the life which Janie wants but she is powerless at this moment because her husband has power over her and decides what she ought to be.

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Janie, just like in her previous marriage, stays and endures the pain of being someone who she is not, she lives to please her husband and does not really fight for her freedom anymore and it can be argued that she is not making an effort to fight back at this moment because a part of her accepts being dominated. She is made to cover up her head like an old woman and when she tries to question her husband why she should wear a rag she is told harshly that she just has to listen and do as she is told. Janie's covering of her head could symbolically mean that she is accepting to cover her real identity for the sake of her husband although this does not make her happy. Janie expresses how she did not like covering her head. She says;

This business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it.

Her hair was NOT going to show in the store. It didn't seem sensible at all (p.73).

Her husband does not allow her to mix and mingle with other people or have conversations with neighbours. Instead she should be at the store all the time or at home cooking for him. It is obvious that all the men in her life just want to dominate and rule over her life.

At times Janie would try to fight for her voice to be heard and for her identity as a woman to stand out but this was an elusive task for her and she realises the battle is too tough for her to win, hence she is just submissive and lives a miserable abusive life. This is revealed when she tells Pheoby that; "No matter what Jody did, she said nothing" (p.102). Janie at this point had decided this was the best way to try and be comfortable in her marriage.

Janie considers running away again but she does not act on it. This could mean that a part of her accepts the suffering as part of her identity. All of her life in her marriage with Jody she does not really make much effort to stand up for her independence because Jody is more powerful than she is both verbally and physically. The fact that Janie does not fight much for herself and

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remains silent does not necessarily make her a weak person, it could mean that she is a person who loves peace.

Janie waits till her husband is aged and is on his deathbed to fight him back verbally as she knows that he is now powerless and is not going to say much or do anything to her. After twenty years of marriage Janie feels liberated by her husband's powerlessness as this is her opportunity to be herself without much influence from him. Spivak (1988) is of the opinion that if the subalterns speak out and reclaim their identity, they will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society.

It is when Jody is about to die when Janie finally opens up to him about how she really feels. She says to him;

Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. Have yo' way all yo' life, trample and mash down and then die ruther than tuh let yo'self heah 'bout it. Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me (p.115)

Jody's death is Janie's recovery path as it sets her free and she is excited about becoming herself. The night of the funeral she lets her hair loose and removes the head rags. This shows how she is ready to take charge of her life and be her own master. It symbolises the loosening of her identity. She tells Pheoby that; "Before she slept that night she burnt up every one of her head

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...” (p.83). Burning the head rags could also suggest that she leaving the past behind and she is starting a new life as a new person who is defined by her and not other people.

Janie even confesses that she is finally free and this lightens her up. This signifies the possibility of Negro women finding their own identity. However, she only becomes free after the death of her husband and this could suggest that black men in a way are barriers to the construction of Negro women's identities. The black men have taken the role of white men during slavery, that is that of oppression. This greatly affects the construction of Negro women's identities, making them elusive. Although the women try to resist this oppression it seems it is difficult to escape, therefore they end up settling for less and for whom they are not.

After the death of Jody, a lot of men are interested in Janie but she is a changed woman now and she does not accept any courtship offers from any of the men. Later on she meets Teacake who is twelve years her junior but is attracted to her despite of her age. At first she debates with herself if she should be in a relationship with someone younger than her but she is happy with him and enjoys his company. The reason which makes Janie fall in love with Teacake is that he treats her like how he would treat any other human being. To Teacake Janie is an equal like him. Janie never experienced such treatment from her previous relationships and her new relationship helps her identify who she really is as she is her own ruler.

Janie does not really care what the public has to say about her life concerning the fact that she is supposed to be mourning her husband. In fact Janie is happy about Jody's death as it gave her the liberty to become the person she wants to be. She tells Pheoby that she is not grieving because she does not see the point on why she should mourn.

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Janie and Teacake move to Everglades, they get married and she is genuinely happy with him.

For the first time Janie feels loved, she makes conversations with Teacake and they laugh together like people who are in love and married would do. Teacake teaches Janie how to play checkers, Janie explains to Pheoby how this made her glow inside.

At the end of the story Janie shoots the sickly Teacake so as to protect herself. Teacake with influence from his sickness wanted to kill Janie but she pulled the trigger before he did. This is symbolical in a way that Janie is a confident woman at the end who knows how to fight her battles. She chooses her life over that of Teacake and this in a way is also some form of liberation on her identity as she now puts herself first and understands that her individuality comes first. However, Janie mourns the death of Teacake because he is the only person whom she had been real with, she does not regret ever being with Teacake. Janie explains to Pheoby that the reason she left Everglades is because she has nothing to stay for which can make her happy since Teacake is gone.

Janie's liberation shows that it is possible for Negro women to construct their own identities even though the road to their self discovery is not a smooth one. Negro women face challenges like that of Janie and their identities are elusive like that of Janie. Janie proves the importance of fighting for one's identity and holding one's own individuality. Her marriages help her find her true identity and at the end she is where she wants to be. The fact that Janie doesn't hide her struggle and narrates her story to Pheoby proves her confidence in her attained individual identity and also proves the prospect of the emancipation of women.

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4.3 Identity Stereotypes: an obstacle to the construction of Negro identities

Negro identities are elusive and difficult to construct due to different reasons. Among other reasons is the fact that there are African American identity stereotypes which are an obstacle to the construction and development of Negro identities. A stereotype identity is a standardized idea of a type of person.

The African American community has certain standards and expectations on how men and women are supposed to behave, which makes it difficult for individuals to create their own identities outside these stereotype identities. Hurston in her novel shows some of these stereotype identities through her characters and this section of the dissertation will attempt to understand how these affected the construction of Negro identities. Hall (1990:223) confirms that how an individual has been represented by others bears a certain effect on how one might represent themselves.

In post-slavery era Negro men took over from the white men in terms of wanting to become masters. Negro men became masters in their households oppressing women in terms of abusing them and possessing them just like how white masters possessed Negro slaves. As time went by, this became a stereotype identity which Negro men cheered on and became. Before the rise of feminism and emancipation of women which fought against this oppression, most Negro men upheld the patriarchal standards of living.

In the novel Janie is faced with this identity stereotype of men and this makes it difficult for her to construct her identity. For Janie and other Negro women it is as good as slavery is not over for them as they are now faced with another form of slavery through their husbands. Two of her

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husbands, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, have the same traits of domineering and being in control of her life. It is stereotype that men are more superior to women in relationships and marriages. It is this stereotype which Janie is fighting against so as to find her voice and break away from tradition. However, during the process she has to endure emotional pain, physical and verbal abuse. Her two husbands do not see her as an equal as they believe in the subservience of women.

Nanny, Janie's grandmother, is a Negro woman who also upholds a stereotype identity. Nanny forces Janie into marriage at the age of sixteen because she believes marriage is a goal for every woman and it provides security for the woman in terms of financial support. In early centuries there was domination of patriarchy and Nanny's generation believed that the only better way to better identify a woman is through her being married and she forces this idea on Janie which is unfair for a young girl like her. Nanny believes that Janie being married would be the envy of town by other women as they also wish for the same. However marriage is not Janie's goal unlike what her grandmother thinks.

Being forced into marriage affects Janie's sexual identity as she has to be sexually intimate with a man she does not love, a man who is decades older than her and who she despises. By listening to her grandmother in marrying Killicks, Janie also conforms to a stereotype identity, that of doing whatever your elders tell you despite the fact that it is not out of your will. Janie's identity at first is also stereotypical and one could argue that she makes life more difficult for her self by thinking she could find happiness in marriage.

Her identity is stereotypical in such a way that she is hopping from one man's bed to another. Her marriage to Starks is out of her choice as she also believes that the only way she could be a

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better person is through marriage. Hurston in Janie's character is also trying to bring out a point that Negro women believe marriage plays a part in their self-discovery. Before Janie meets Teacake she has had two miserable marriages but she still does not hesitate much to marry a third husband. One can argue that Janie's character at this point is stereotypical to that of her grandmother's generation as she does not really feel complete without a man in her life, which is why she marries for the third time. She did not know Teacake's personality fully and therefore it was possible for Teacake's character to change in future just like how Joe Starks changed from being the loving man he presented to Janie when they met. Janie did not think much about other consequences of marrying again; it could have been possible for Teacake to behave like her previous husbands did.

Hurston by killing Janie's husbands is bringing out a point that it is possible for women to identify themselves even outside marriages. The novel begins with Janie alone and it also ends with Janie alone. This is symbolical because it is a way of trying to break stereotypical identities which are a barrier to the construction of Negro identities. At the end of the novel Janie is at a place where she is happy although she is pained by the loss of the only man she ever loved Teacake.

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CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

This dissertation set out to interrogate how Negro identities are constructed in America as depicted in African American fiction. The following texts were chosen for analysis: James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zora Nearle Hurston's *Their Eyes were watching God*.

Chapter one outlined the scope of the research which presented the area of study, key questions, Justification of study, theoretical framework, research methodologies and literature review.

In pursuit of the objective of this dissertation, Chapter two explored the politics of social belonging and identification in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Through the analysis of the novel it was argued that because of racism and economic deprivation, some Negro men and women whose skin color is close to whiteness resort to escaping their dilemma and live like "white people."

However, the vision proffered in Weldon's *Ex-Colored Man* was contradicted in the subsequent chapter. Chapter three examined Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a tool for the re-affirmation of Negro identity, albeit under difficult circumstances where the white people are determined not to recognize the existence of the Negro. The novel, it was argued, can be read as a search for socio-political space in America although faced with numerous obstacles along the way. The obstacles include Negroes not being given the same platform as the white race to

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gain their social and political rights. Whenever blacks try to progress they are pulled back and threatened by white America. But nevertheless, Ellison's novel offers a narrative of resistance that spells out confrontation and self introspection on the part of the Negro as the way forward.

Chapter four looked at Negro identities from a female writer's perspective. The subject of analysis was Zora Nearle Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The chapter showed the female struggle for the attainment of their individual identities under circumstances of patriarchy in Negro communities. It proved the possibility of the liberation of Negro identities as the main character is emancipated and liberated at the end of the novel.

The current chapter is the conclusion of this dissertation which contains summary of findings and possible solutions.

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