



“Explore Issues of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Culture: Identifying Themes in African American Literature”

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Abstract

This review article delves into the complex relationship between gender, class, race, and African American literature and culture, looking at how these overlapping social identities impact African Americans' real-life experiences and literary creations. Through an analysis of seminal works and critical theories, the study highlights key themes such as identity, resistance, community, and intersectionality. This dissertation highlights the importance of gender, class, and race in African American literature by offering a thorough framework for comprehending these issues in relation to their cultural and historical backgrounds.

Keywords: Race, Gender, Class, African American Culture, African American Literature, Intersectionality, Literary Themes.

Introduction

Every aspect of African American life—from personal experiences to society expectations—is intricately intertwined with racial, gender, and socioeconomic factors. Literature offers a profound medium for capturing these complexities, allowing African American voices to articulate their struggles, triumphs, and resilience. From the brutal legacies of slavery and segregation to contemporary issues of systemic racism and economic inequality, African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have documented and challenged these realities through their work.

In African American culture, gender, class, and race all interact in complex ways that make for distinct experiences and obstacles. African American literature reflects these intersections, exploring the compounded effects of racial discrimination, gender biases, and socio-economic disparities. For instance, the narratives of African American women reveal how racism and sexism collectively shape their lives, while economic struggles are often portrayed in the context of broader racial and gender dynamics.

This review paper aims to analyze these intersecting themes within African American literature, providing a comprehensive examination of how race, gender, and class are represented and interrogated. By employing an intersectional framework, this study seeks to highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of African American life, enriching our understanding of the diverse perspectives within their literary tradition.





“The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Culture”

- **Race**

Race is a central theme in African American culture, profoundly shaping the experiences and identities of individuals and communities. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, and systematic racism have all had lasting effects on African Americans and their culture. Literature has been a crucial medium for expressing and challenging these racial injustices. Authors such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison have vividly depicted the harsh realities of racial oppression, exploring its psychological and social impacts. Ellison's "Invisible Man" delves into the alienation and invisibility felt by African Americans in a racially discriminatory society, while Baldwin's essays and novels confront the pervasive nature of racism and its corrosive effects on both individuals and communities. Morrison's "Beloved" portrays the haunting legacy of slavery and the enduring impact of racial trauma. Through these narratives, African American literature not only documents the struggle against racial injustice but also asserts the resilience and strength of black identity, offering a powerful critique of the societal structures that perpetuate racial inequality.

- **Gender**

Gender dynamics within African American culture are intricately linked to the broader context of race and class. African American women, in particular, navigate a unique intersection of racial and gendered oppression. The literature of authors like Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and bell hooks addresses the specific challenges faced by black women, highlighting issues of sexism, patriarchy, and resilience. A moving look at the oppression and eventual liberation of Black American women, Walker's "The Color Purple" traces their path from enslavement to independence. Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is a powerful ode to Black women's history, culture, and language that highlights their fight for autonomy and expression. Stories like this highlight the resilience and empowerment of Black women, who frequently confront obstacles based on their gender in addition to their race. Literary works that explore gender roles within African American culture help us better comprehend societal gender dynamics while also illuminating the distinct realities of Black women. The works of contemporary authors like Roxane Gay and Brittney Cooper continue this exploration, highlighting ongoing issues of intersectionality and the fight for gender equality within the black community.

- **Class**

Class disparities play a significant role in shaping the experiences of African Americans, intersecting with race and gender to create multifaceted social hierarchies. Economic inequality and limited social mobility are recurrent themes in African American literature, reflecting the systemic barriers faced by black communities. Authors such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes have depicted the harsh realities of poverty and the struggle for economic justice. Wright's "Native Son" portrays the devastating effects of poverty and racial oppression on an individual's life, highlighting the systemic forces that drive individuals to desperation. Hughes' poetry and prose often celebrate the aspirations and resilience of working-class African Americans, capturing their dreams and struggles with poignant clarity. These literary works underscore the importance of economic justice in the broader fight for racial and social equality. Contemporary authors like Jesmyn Ward and Ta-Nehisi Coates continue to explore class issues, examining how economic disenfranchisement intersects with racial and gender oppression in modern America. By exploring class within the context of African American culture, literature provides a nuanced understanding of the economic challenges and resilience of black communities, emphasizing the need for comprehensive socio-economic reforms to address





systemic inequalities and promote true social justice.

Literary Techniques

Themes of gender, class, and race are explored in African American literature using a range of literary devices, providing readers with a multi-layered understanding of the African American experience. To convey the breadth and complexity of the characters' experiences and the larger societal challenges they represent, these strategies are vital.

1. Symbolism

African American literature makes extensive use of symbolism to convey ideas and concepts with more depth. Black Americans are portrayed as invisible and marginalized in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," where the protagonist's invisibility is a metaphor for this. Similarly, the specter represents the lasting anguish of slavery and the fight to eradicate its effects in "Beloved" by Toni Morrison. Symbols in these pieces frequently have more than one interpretation, shedding light on personal and communal histories.

2. Narrative Structure

Many works of African American literature have intricate narrative structures that mirror the stories themselves. Authors frequently use fragmented narratives, numerous viewpoints, and non-linear timelines to delve into various aspects of their characters' lives and histories. The epistolary style allows Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" to delve deeply into Celie's journey while simultaneously allowing the viewpoints of other characters to be heard. The interdependence of individual and group hardships is better conveyed to the reader through this format.

3. Vernacular and Dialect

The stories of African American literature are deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic reality of African American communities, thanks to the peculiar usage of vernacular and dialect. The use of vernacular speech by authors such as Langston Hughes in his poems and Zora Neale Hurston in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" helps to create a genuine portrayal of their characters and locations. Not only does this method make the story more realistic, but it also honors and preserves the distinct language legacy of African Americans.

4. Magical Realism

Some African American writers use magical realism to depict the bizarre and frequently brutal reality of African American life by fusing the fantastic with the everyday. An excellent example of this is "Beloved" by Toni Morrison, where the supernatural aspects highlight the mental wounds caused by slavery. This technique offers a strong way to tell stories that go beyond traditional realism, allowing us to delve deeper into issues like resilience, memory, and trauma.

5. Allegory

African American literature frequently use allegory to express more abstract political and social issues. By utilizing Bigger Thomas's narrative to demonstrate the devastating consequences of racism and poverty, "Native Son" by Richard Wright allegorizes the systematic subjugation of African Americans. By utilizing personal storylines to mirror broader societal concerns, writers can criticize societal systems and promote change through allegorical storytelling.

6. Intertextuality

Another important approach in African American literature is intertextuality, which refers to the link between texts. Literary works, historical events, and cultural artifacts are frequently referenced or alluded to by authors in order to bolster their narratives and place them in a larger perspective. When





writing her novel "Jazz," Toni Morrison, for instance, included allusions to jazz into the text in a way that echoed the improvisatory rhythms of the music. This method enables a multi-level reading experience, in which the text acquires supplementary significance by its interconnections with other literary works.

7. Stream of Consciousness

The characters' inner thoughts and emotions are portrayed in a flowing and often disjointed way using the stream of consciousness approach. The protagonist's inner turmoil and contemplations are exposed in James Baldwin's "Go Tell It on the Mountain," which demonstrates how this method offers profound psychological insight into characters' brains. By using this method, readers are able to delve deeply into the minds of the characters, comprehending their inner drives and emotional complexities.

8. Metaphor

In African American literature, metaphor is a potent device for evoking similarities and bringing attention to hidden issues. In "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," Maya Angelou uses the metaphor of a caged bird to express her feelings of imprisonment and longing for release. African American literature is rich with metaphors, which have a way of condensing complicated feelings and experiences into a single striking picture.

African American authors capture the complexities of the African American experience in their rich, multi-dimensional works by adopting these literary approaches. These methods not only make their stories more engaging and beautiful, but they also highlight the political, cultural, and social topics that are important in African American literature.

Review of literature

(Athanasios, 1998) studied "Diverse Learners, Diverse Texts: Exploring Identity and Difference through Literary Encounters" and said that The participants in these two urban fifth grade English classes represented a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. It centers on the pupils' individual struggles and how various literary choices impacted their cultural identity construction. Research shows that children can't develop their critical thinking abilities in areas like literature, diversity, and identity without classrooms that are diverse and inclusive. (Mattis, 2002) studied "Religion and Spirituality in the Meaning-Making and Coping Experiences of African American Women: A Qualitative Analysis" and said that This study delves into the ways in which African American women navigate and overcome challenges through spiritual and religious pursuits. The 23 participants' stories revolved around eight main themes: having faith in higher powers, finding one's purpose, developing one's character, overcoming constraints, answering existential questions, questioning reality, spiritual surrender, and the role of religion in questioning reality.

(McDonald et al., 2007) studied "Disability, race/ethnicity and gender: themes of cultural oppression, acts of individual resistance" and said that This research delves into the ways oppression, learning disabilities, and other forms of sociopolitical minority status intersect. One factor that contributes to the problem of disability discrimination is the prevalence of negative preconceptions about persons with learning disabilities, as is highlighted in the article. These difficulties harm racial/ethnic narratives as well as appropriate gender expectations. The





necessity to combat these damaging claims and alter prevailing cultural misconceptions has been brought to light by research.

(Townsend, 2008) studied “Protecting Our Daughters: Intersection of Race, Class and Gender in African American Mothers’ Socialization of Their Daughters’ Heterosexuality” and said that Using intersectionality and Black feminism as its theoretical framework, this study examines the experiences of African American mothers and daughters. How African American girls hear their mothers' perspectives on love relationships is the main topic of this research. Those about whom Nkomo and The Edmondson Bell penned an article in 1998. To describe this occurrence, a few writers in the Journal of Comparative Family Studies have used the term "armoring" (29, 285-295). For Black American women from low-income backgrounds, my sexual risk paradigm revolves around the armoring process. Then, I provide a theoretical framework, comparing and contrasting current social cognitive theories with my proposed model according to how effectively they describe the variables that impact sexual behavior within this demographic. The consequences for programs to reduce sexual risk are also discussed. (Burrell et al., 2013) studied “Race-acting: The varied and complex affirmative meaning of “acting Black” for African-American adolescents” and said that Using a culturally responsive theoretical framework, this research aims to examine how African-American middle school pupils engage in "race-acting" and test the "acting White" hypothesis. An important and positive aspect of Black identity, according to thematic content analysis, is academic brilliance. This study offers methodological support for understanding African-Americans' culturally specific identification processes and racially biased belief systems, lending credence to the idea of "race-acting" as a theoretical framework.

(Capodilupo & Kim, 2014) studied “Gender and race matter: The importance of considering intersections in Black women’s body image.” and said that Racism, ethnicity, culture, and prejudice are some of the lenses through which this article examines the body image of Black and African American women. It delves at the impact of gender and race on self-perception through a qualitative lens. Cultural values, body ideals, racism, and sexism were some of the subjects covered in the focus groups attended by 26 women from a major metropolis in this study. The study sheds new light on the concept of body image by introducing a new theory. (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015) studied “Racial Identity and the Development of Body Image Issues among African American Adolescent Girls” and said that Finding out how dyslexic students cope with school is the driving force for this qualitative study. Because they are based on quantitative assessments, traditional methods might cause users to feel inadequate and psychologically hurt. Interviews, field notes, and diaries shed light on the children's speech, interactions, and disability context. Focusing on the emotional impact of reading obstacles should educate researchers and instructors that quantitative methods don't always provide a whole picture of a child's experience.

(Jones et al., 2018) studied “African American Gender Roles: A Content Analysis of Empirical Research From 1981 to 2017” and said that This review compiled research from the field of psychology that looked at gender roles in African American communities. Examining publication patterns, sample characteristics, and research methodology was done before dividing publications into five subject groups. The bulk of the studies used quantitative methodologies and were published entirely during the last eighteen years. By discussing the pros and cons of previous research, this literature review on African American gender roles gives the area of Black psychology something to think about.

(Love et al., 2018) studied “An exploration of the intersection of race, gender and generation in African American women doing social justice work” and said that Black women of varying ages share their perspectives on race throughout this piece. The 183 women who took part in the study ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-nine, and they were all dedicated social justice workers. Without exception, they were





all Black. Black women social activists' perspectives on race have received scant attention from scholars. An online survey, six in-depth interviews, and four focus groups were utilized to gather data in this exploratory sequential mixed-methods study. A variety of theoretical frameworks were employed to examine the results, including intersectionality, social identity theory, and perspective theory. When it comes to racial and social justice movements, Millennials have their own unique perspective, in contrast to Baby Boomers and Generation X. Millennials are more likely to describe their racial experiences as gendered and more receptive to the idea that their identities are complex and interconnected than previous generations. Millennials, following in the footsteps of Generation X and the Baby Boomers, were vocal in their support for social justice causes and were willing to risk everything to see them through. They were also more receptive to working with other underrepresented groups.

(Cooper et al., 2020) studied “‘That is why we raise children’: African American fathers' race-related concerns for their adolescents and parenting strategies” and said that This study aims to better understand African American dads' perspectives on race and how those opinions impact their approach to raising their children when they enter puberty. Both biological and non-biological fathers were interviewed in a medium-sized city in the Southeastern United States. The significance of having a strong support system, the significance of overcoming obstacles, the significance of building strong identities, the significance of achievement, and

their own racial experiences were all significant topics. There were also media stereotypes of Black kids. Another crucial aspect to examine while examining the father's concerns and parenting styles was his gender.

Themes in African American Literature

1. “Identity and Self-Discovery”

Themes of coming into one's own and learning to live with one's many identities—including gender, class, race, and sexual orientation—recur frequently in works of African American literature. In "Invisible Man," a work by Ralph Ellison, the protagonist's coming-of-age mirrors the larger African American fight for identity in a racist society, and the author deftly explores this issue. The story explores the protagonist's coming-to-terms with the fact that he is invisible in a culture that rejects him because of his race. "Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston is similar in that it follows Janie Crawford as she challenges society norms and conventional gender roles on her path to self-actualization and independence. The protagonist, Milkman Dead, in "Song of Solomon" by Toni Morrison, discovers his identity and purpose through researching his family's past. This topic of self-discovery is central to the novel. These stories highlight the significance of coming into one's own and claiming one's identity in the face of societal limitations.

2. Resistance and Empowerment

African American literature often explores themes of empowerment and resistance, shedding light on the fight for freedom and justice, both as a community and as individuals. Both "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs and "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" by Frederick Douglass are landmark publications that chronicle the struggle for freedom from slavery and the savage institution of slavery. Not only do these stories highlight individual strength, but they also motivate readers to stand up against structural oppression. Authors such as Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison delves into the complex ways in which oppression of gender and race persists in their more recent works. In "Beloved," Morrison delves into the emotional wounds inflicted by slavery and the process of regaining one's value, while "Kindred" delves into the intricacies of resistance and survival throughout several eras.





As an additional point, "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker depicts the growth of Celie, a woman who goes from being a helpless victim to a strong advocate for herself in the story.

3. Community and Solidarity

African American literature is rich with themes of community and solidarity, which highlight the significance of working together as a group to overcome challenges. As the Younger family fights for economic equality, the drama "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry highlights the importance of community and family ties. The play shows how a strong sense of community can motivate people to work together and build resilience. In a similar vein, the poetry of Langston Hughes frequently lauds the communal nature of African American existence, encapsulating the commonalities, hardships, and dreams of Black communities. In "The Color Purple," by Alice Walker, we see how community matters. The heroine, Celie, gains confidence and strength from her connections with other women, and this shows how solidarity can change lives. Also, in dealing with individual and group trauma, Toni Cade Bambara's "The Salt Eaters" delves into the significance of community support and solidarity.

4. Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's introduction of the concept of intersectionality is crucial to comprehending the interdependent character of social identities in literature written by African Americans. This section delves at the ways in which the intersections of gender, class, and race impact the lives and stories of African Americans. Works by Audre Lorde, such as "Sister Outsider," shed light on the complex realities faced by Black women and highlight the necessity of addressing different forms of oppression. In a similar vein, bell hooks's works promote a holistic view of social justice by questioning the ways in which gender, class, and race interact with one another. The many facets of the African American experience are brought to light by modern writers' ongoing exploration of intersectionality. Both the essays of Roxane Gay and the book "Eloquent Rage" by Brittney Cooper examine the reality faced by Black women through the lenses of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Furthermore, the works of Jesmyn Ward, like "Salvage the Bones" and "Sing, Unburied, Sing," offer a moving examination of intersectionality through the portrayal of rural Southern African American families' experiences navigating poverty, race, and familial relationships. Through the exploration of these topics, African American literature offers a detailed and intricate view of being African American, mirroring the intricacies and strength of a people who have persistently battled for self-determination, agency, and fair treatment. In addition to chronicling the hardships that African Americans have endured throughout history, this literature also honors their cultural achievements and resilience, providing a moving testimony to their fight for equality and personal growth.

Thematic Exploration

Thematic exploration in African American literature reveals the centrality of identity and self-discovery, resistance and empowerment, community and solidarity, and intersectionality. These themes collectively underscore the complexities of African American life, shaped by race, gender, and class. Works like Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" and Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" delve into personal journeys of identity against societal constraints, highlighting the quest for self-awareness and fulfillment. Narratives of resistance and empowerment, exemplified by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, inspire collective action against systemic injustices, while contemporary authors like Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler highlight ongoing struggles and triumphs, such as reclaiming self-worth and navigating temporal boundaries of oppression. The importance of community is celebrated in works such as Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," emphasizing solidarity's transformative power in fostering resilience and collective action. Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw and explored





by writers like Audre Lorde and bell hooks, provides a nuanced understanding of the interconnected nature of social identities, emphasizing the overlapping oppressions faced by African Americans. Authors like Roxane Gay and Jesmyn Ward continue this exploration, depicting the intricate layers of identity shaped by race, gender, class, and sexuality. Together, these themes enrich our understanding of the African American experience, reflecting both historical and contemporary realities and offering a powerful testament to their ongoing fight for equality, identity, and justice.

Conclusion

African American literature offers a profound exploration of race, gender, and class, revealing the intricate interplay of these identities in shaping the African American experience. Through themes of identity and self-discovery, resistance and empowerment, community and solidarity, and intersectionality, this literary tradition documents historical and ongoing struggles while celebrating resilience and cultural contributions. By employing an intersectional framework, African American literature provides a nuanced understanding of social dynamics, underscoring the need for continued advocacy for equality and justice. This body of work stands as a powerful testament to the enduring spirit and rich cultural heritage of the African American community.

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