

Tribhuvan University

Unknown Identity and the Delusion of Freedom in Edward P. Jones's

*The Known World*

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## Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Unknown Identity and the Delusion of Freedom in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*" submitted to the Central Department of English, TU, Kirtipur by Astha Rijal has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Unknown Identity and the Delusion of Freedom in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*

Abstract

The thesis titled “Unknown Identity and the Delusion of Freedom in Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*” examines the social, psychological as well as physiological impacts of the system of slavery on the people living in the fictional Manchester county during the Antebellum era. Through the exploration of the character’s psychological aspects like inferiority, identity crisis and alienation, the thesis makes use of Frantz Fanon’s notions in *Black Skin White Masks*. This work highlights the social as well psychological consequences of the hegemonic systems such as slavery and colonialism. Having examined the novel, this study explores the delusion the characters are living in with regards to their identity, power and freedom. Fanon delves into the neurosis that pervades the psyche of black people because of the difference they face with regards to their skin colour. He argues that living under such conditions creates a mental condition among the black folk whose consequences include alienation. Additionally, the perceived difference between the two races in racist communities could lead to an inferiority complex among the black people. Drawing upon Fanon’s ideas, the thesis attempts to elaborate the impact of deep rooted racial discrimination prevalent during the Antebellum era and the influence it had on the subjects of discrimination. Despite the fact that the thesis and its study is based on the antebellum period described in *The Known World*, the issue is still relevant in various forms.

Key Words: slavery, identity, alienation, inferiority complex, psychology

*The Known World* is a novel about slavery, set in the American south before the civil war, when racial discrimination and injustice was so deeply implanted that even free black people owned slaves. The Pulitzer Prize winning novel seamlessly weaves the lives of the freed and the enslaved, whites, blacks, and Indians, and allows all of us a deeper understanding of the enduring multidimensional world created by the institution of slavery. Several critics have reviewed this work of art through different lenses of race, identity and freedom.

David Ikard, in “White Supremacy under Fire: The Unrewarded Perspective in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*”, banishes the idea perceived by black slave owners that they are better and more moral masters in comparison to white masters. “it demonstrates that their claims to higher moral and ethical grounds on the basis of their status as former slaves and/or victims of white supremacist domination are but an extension of white supremacist slavery ideology”(Ikard 79). He claims that the suppression and cruelty they faced as slaves does not warrant them to become the oppressors themselves. He sees no significant difference between white and black slave owners.

In her essay, “Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South,” Susan Donaldson studies Jones’ *The Known World* as a postmodern novel. Her argument claims that it is one of the “postmodern novels written for a postmodern South and a postmodern age” (Donaldson 268).

The ambivalence faced by the characters of the novel in regards to their identity as a result of having a black slave owner is discussed by Carolyn Vallenga Berman in her article “*The Known World* in World Literature: Bakhtin, Glissant, and Edward P. Jones”. Though it sounds good to know that a black slave who once lived a life of suffering turns his fate into becoming an owner of a plantation, the impact it

has on the lives of these people is quite contradictory. The article also emphasizes how the black slave owners had to wear a mask and undermine their own identity in order to become superior to the other slaves and rule over them.

Similarly, in “Imagining Other Worlds: Gender, and the Power Line in Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*”, Katherine Clay Bassard explores the notions of power as a result of race and gender. According to her, black people have a “will to power and privilege as a way of mitigating blackness” (Bassard 408). While analyzing *The Known World*, she also delves into some related notions like family relations and property rights.

Ignatius Chukwumah in “Mimetic Desire and the Complication of the Conventional Neo-Slave Narrative Form in Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*” takes a different view of the novel and spotlights its complexities. He argues that the novel’s facade of a neo-slave narrative and an anti-slavery text contradicts it as it presents a black slave owner.

*The Known World* has been studied and explored by various scholars as a postmodern neo-slave novel emphasizing the racial as well as social issues of subjugation and injustice. However, the psychological effect of slavery and the ways it affected the lives and relationships of people is also worth the study. Hence the focus of this thesis is on exploring the psychological impact of slavery on the characters of the novel. While exploring the adverse effect of the system of slavery, the thesis also aims to justify the problems of identity and the delusion of freedom through Frantz Fanon’s notions of alienation, rooted psychological acceptance or rejection of self and oppressions of various types. Fanon stands as the dominant author and critique to the work below due to his concern with the psychopathology of colonization and the human social and cultural consequences of decolonization.

Fanon's first book *Black Skin, White Masks* examines how race, language, and culture create and shape the identity of colonized subjects. The colonized people try to access the white culture through assimilation, but the racialization process does not allow them to fully integrate themselves with the colonizers. According to Fanon, It results as an "outcome of a double process: primarily economic, subsequently, the internalization, or better, the epidermalization of this inferiority" (Fanon 4).

Fanon investigates how racial suppression influences the colonized subjects and their possibility of identity and existence. The experience impacts not just the social and psychological aspects of the colonized people but every aspect of their personal and social life.

Jones's thorough knowledge on social and legal intricacies of issues to do with slaveholding enables him to display a complex of the startling quality of life around the region. Jones is a distinguished American author acclaimed for his profound storytelling and intricate characterizations. Born in 1950 in Washington, D.C., Jones has forged a remarkable literary career marked by deep exploration of African American life and history. Though he has published a relatively modest number of works, his talent has garnered significant recognition, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2004 for his novel *The Known World*. A graduate of the College of the Holy Cross and the University of Virginia, Jones's academic background is complemented by his experience as a teacher and a journalist, which has enriched his narrative skill and thematic depth. His works often deal with issues like identity, race, and the complexities of human relationships, earning him a distinguished place in contemporary American literature.

In the context of slavery and racial subjugation, *The Known World* can be explored using Fanon's theory of alienation. Alienation is the condition of feeling

disconnected from oneself and the surroundings. Fanon uses this term to explain the ways in which black people are compelled to exist in relation to others and to identify with whiteness rather than their own blackness. Fanon elaborates the condition further:

I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world, “that I am a brute beast, that my people and I are like a walking dung-heap that disgustingly fertilizes sweet sugar cane and silky cotton, that I have no use in the world.” Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human. (73)

He discusses the damaging effect of alienation and emphasizes that this sense of alienation makes it impossible for people to understand what black identity means on its own. This results in several black people living their whole life struggling to portray themselves as less black or white altogether. These complexities of identity expand their delusion of self and at the same time inhibit them from building good relationships with both blacks and whites. The narrator reflects, “It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn’t fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made” (Jones 8). One can note in the novel Moses's incomprehension of a black man owning him and keeping him as a slave. This is the beginning of the complexities and ambiguities brought about by slavery in the lives of the characters in the novel.

Henry Townsend’s story is at the center of the novel. Henry is emancipated by his father, Augustus after many years of labour as a slave. But soon after gaining

freedom, Henry becomes an owner of a plantation himself, keeping several slaves to his name. However in the novel, Henry is not the only black man who becomes a slave owner. He is a part of a small group of other free blacks who accommodate between the slaves and the other rich black owners.

The complex narrative of the novel moves back and forth between different times and locales to tell the varied stories of many characters, both white and black. A number of these stories center on the lives of people who have crossed the path of Henry. Henry is certain that he will be a better master than the white slaveholders he has known, but once he becomes a slave owner, he does none of the good he had intended to do and becomes indistinguishable from the white slave owners in the county.

The story of Henry's achievements as a slave owner and the consequences of the same start to detangle towards the end of his very short life. Soon after his death, his father, Augustus, who was a freed slave is kidnapped and sold back into slavery. After a long struggle of freeing himself and his family, he dies as a slave at the end. On the other hand, Henry's death also cultivates a sense of opportunity in his favorite slave, Moses, who wishes to marry Henry's widow and become the owner of Henry's plantation. Dismissing his association with the other slaves, including his son and his wife, no matter how much he tries, he does not find any white guide and gets no success in winning over his former master's wife. His life ends miserably as a slave again when he is captured and taken into bondage.

During his youth as a slave, Henry works particularly hard to make himself significant and important to the master, William Robbins. Even after Henry's parents manage to secure the family's freedom, Henry maintains a high level of loyalty to Robbins. On the other hand, Robbins patronizes him immediately. He soon notices

Henry's deeds and his affection for the boy starts to grow. He helps Henry to be a shoemaker and also guides him to purchase his plantation and his first slaves.

Henry is favoured more than the other slaves by his master because of his youth, wit and his skills. These three attributes combined helped him increase his value in his master's eyes and this is the reason that he has to stay as a slave for almost ten years without his family. William Warren Rogers gives in *Antebellum Thomas County 1825-186*, examples of how the values of different slaves shifted in various appraisals. According to Rogers, slaves were "valued according to age, sex, health and skill" (62) Somebody in the same social position as Henry is most likely valued even higher because he has many years to continue working and serving their master. It is therefore easy to comprehend that his parents have a hard time gathering the amount necessary for his freedom from slavery:

Robbins came to depend on seeing the boy waving from his place in front of the mansion, came to know that the sight of Henry meant the storm was over and that he was safe from bad men disguised as angels, came to develop a kind of love for the boy, and that love built up morning after morning, was another reason to up the selling price Mildred and Augustus Townsend would have to pay for their son. (Jones 27-28)

Left on their own and subject to the white structure of power, Henry and Moses in the novel, try to replicate that structure, which leads to their alienation from both black and white people. The inferiority felt by the characters of the novel Henry and Moses with regards to their racial identity and their experiences of oppression prompts them to strive for positions of higher power in order to veil their sense of inferiority. However, such positions, either as the master or the overseer, do not exempt them

from being subjected to the white gaze on account of their skin color. The effect of the white gaze transforms bodily existence. Fanon argues:

In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. (83)

Henry faces such consciousness from his young age and hence his psycho-social development and his understanding of his own identity is affected. He is born a slave at William Robbin's plantation. Augustus and Milderd Townsend, Henry's parents, were also William Robbin's slaves until Augustus bought his and his wife's freedom. Henry remained a slave and grew under Robbin's care until he was eighteen years old, when his father Augustus was finally able to pay for his freedom from William Robbins.

Having been separated from his parents for most of his early life, Henry is deprived of the opportunity to learn the values and beliefs that were a part of the black lives. As a result Henry idolizes his master and he strives to redeem his lost self by yearning for power rather than freedom. Henry waits for his master Robbins to return home after his journeys everyday. Henry's effort to earn recognition and approval from his master can be compared to Fanon's study of Mayotte Capécia's novel *I Am a Martinican Woman* (1948) in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon views Mayotte's yearning for whiteness as a result or effect of the colonial

mis- recognition of self. She constantly seeks approval from whites and embodies black inferiority. In their pursuit for approval, they put whites in the position of authority and assume an inferior position for themselves. This results in dual narcissism according to Fanon, where “the white man is sealed in his whiteness and the black man in his blackness” (Fanon 3)

In the following passage we can note how Henry tries to the best of his ability to gain acceptance and approval of William Robbins in order to fit in and secure a good position under his rule. William, on the other hand, is also bound by the system of slavery and put into the position of authority where he is also trapped:

Robbins came to depend on seeing the boy waving from his place in front of the mansion, came to know that sight of Henry meant the storm was over and that he was safe from bad men disguised as angels, came to develop a kind of love for the boy, and that love, built up morning after morning, was another reason to up the selling price Mildred and Augustus Townsend would have to pay for their son. (Jones 27-28)

Henry and William’s relationship continues as it was even after Augustus bought Henry’s freedom back. As his parents had very little role and influence on him throughout his growing years and since Henry had started relating himself more with his master, He started developing a sense of alienation.

Henry’s alienation from his family is most markedly felt by Augustus when he is accompanied by Henry to a shipping agent:

About halfway the trip home, the man realized that these had been his son’s first days of freedom. He and Mildred had planned a week of celebration, culminating with neighbors coming by the next Sunday. Augustus said, “You feelin any different?”

“Bout what?” Henry said. He was holding the reins to the mules.

“Bout bein free? Bout not bein nobody’s slave?”

“No, sir, I don’t reckon I do.” He wanted to know if he was supposed to, but he did not know how to ask that. He wondered who was waiting now for Robbins to come riding up on Sir Guilderham. (49)

It is evident that Henry does not apprehend the meaning of emancipation. Born and raised in a white household away from his family, he is not familiar with the notion of fighting for one’s freedom. That’s why his supposed freedom does not feel like one to him. He is too deeply drowned in his bondage with his white master. According to Bernard Bell, "The economic opportunity that was imperative in order for former slaves to compete equally with whites and to realize the American dream"( 8), Henry adopts the white attitude of relating success with ownership. He learns the workings of the power structure in the plutocracy and familiarizes himself with the institution of slavery. According to Shauna Morgan Kirlew, “His purchase of a land and development of a plantation of his own is the key to his entry into the superior echelon of the society and grants him access into a financial whiteness” (75).

Henry imitates his white master as a way to move up the social ladder. Since his childhood, his ideals of a good life is that of his master’s. So he goes ahead and creates his life just like a white man would do - becoming a slave owner, and in the process, undermining his identity as a black man. He was stimulated by the economic and social benefit of owning slaves. Regarding this issue, Koger claims:

In spite of spending years in bondage, the freed slaves harbored no ill feelings toward their former masters and showed no signs of a deep hatred for the institution that enslaved them. The ex-slaves who owned human chattel

regarded slavery not as an oppressive institution but as an economic necessity upon which their livelihood depended. ( 31)

Henry's bond with his first slave, Moses, sets a turning point in Henry's life in regards to his alienation from his identity as a black man. Henry treats Moses in a very friendly manner in the beginning. However, his position of a slave and the way the system of slavery works is reminded to Henry by his master William Robbins:

The law expects you to know what is master and what is slave. And it does not matter if you are not much darker than your slave. The law is blind to that. You are the master and that is all the law wants to know. The law will come to you and stand behind you. But if you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns round and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed that you will need. (123)

William Robbin's ideas align with the notion that the institution is higher than an individual. Being at the top of the hierarchy ensures Henry's respect and authority in the public eye. This also provides him the social status he craves. In his influential work *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1955), E. Franklin Frazier memorably lays bare this attitude among the black people, stating that, "the single factor that has dominated the mental outlook of the black bourgeoisie has been its obsession with the struggle for status" (236). In the abovementioned passage, Robbins touches exactly upon this principle. Indeed, as long as Henry is a master, "the law is blind" toward his skin color. Accordingly, upon hearing this, Henry embraces his complete transformation into a master by slapping Moses to remind him of his place as a slave (Henry 64).

Henry quickly understands that the whole institution of slavery is grounded upon objectification of slaves and treating them like owned property. The master-slave boundary is too evident and unbreakable. Henry's encounter with Moses

maintains the already-established power equilibrium between the master and the slave. This whole experience takes him one step further away from his identity as a black man. One can note this in his confrontation with his father, Augustus:

“You mean tell me you bought a man and he yours now? You done bought him and you didn’t free that man? You own a man, Henry?”

“Yes. Well, yes, Papa,”

“Don’t you know the wrong of that, Henry?” Augustus said.

“Nobody never told me the wrong of that.”

“Why should anybody haveta teach you the wrong, son?” Augustus said.

“Ain’t you got eyes to see it without me tellin you?”

“I ain’t done nothin that any white man wouldn’t do. I ain’t broke no law. I ain’t. You listen here.” (Jones 138)

The relationship between the members of the Townsend family grows more tense as Henry continues to disregard his father Augustus’s disapproval and becomes the owner of many slaves. Augustus and Mildred, who struggled all their life for freedom, are left with profound disappointment and disillusionment. After the argument with his father about owning slaves, Henry takes the legal composition as justification of his actions. He insists that he has not done anything illegal. This implies that he has developed the imitating mechanism to show that he is as successful and as equal as whites. In this regard, Esmikhani and Pourgharib add, “white could convince black people that they are inferior and only white are right and the tragic part is the fact that some Negroes form their self-image on the base of what white racist defined for them” (25). This is exactly what Henry does to show his superiority.

Apart from Henry, we see other characters in the novel also affected by alienation due to their complex racial identity and the oppressive system of slavery.

One of Henry's first slaves, Moses, also falls into this trap in the novel. As an overseer of Henry's plantation, he is distanced and set apart from other fellow slaves in the plantation. He is not just alienated and distanced from other slaves because of the job he does, but also as an individual character. His personality is projected to be an isolated character in the novel. We can see many references in the novel that exemplify his comfort and enjoyment in the secluded wilderness. He sets himself apart from his family and finds strength in nature and eating dirt. Jones states in the novel that, "He ate it not only to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the field, but because the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life" (Jones2).

The experiences Moses had in the plantation and the unfair treatment he faced led to his self-isolation. Incidents of being separated from the love of his life Bessie at an auction and the unjust treatment of his race in the system of slavery controlled by whites lead to his disillusionment. Moreover, the fact that he is enslaved by a man of his own race further amplifies his feelings. "It took Moses more than two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made" (8-9).

Moses had the idea that the system of slavery functions based on racial superiority but the reality of being a slave to a black man made him realize that financial and social upliftment could also provide superiority and authority. Accordingly, Moses is disoriented through the novel, unable to form any meaningful relationship with anyone unless for the sake of gaining power. Moses's attempts at winning over Caldonia, Henry's wife, hint at his desire of taking his master's place and ultimately gaining a "new identity beyond contractual constraints (Boroumand, Safoura 2022).

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon reveals the black man's worries during the postcolonial period. His exploration of racism psychoanalytically is an ironic study of the black man's breakdown. His argument advises that black men attempt to look like or to appear like whites; but still do not truly be able to identify themselves as any. Though Fanon's ideas are based on the study of colonized people, the same idea relates to the experiences of blacks in the system of slavery. Fanon asserts:

Every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (Fanon 9)

The type of racism argued by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as Larose T. Parris notes, clearly proclaims the system Fanon uses to look into the colonized crisis of “self-recognizable proof” (13). The black man wears a veil under the effect of slavery, which distorts blacks from acting naturally. Fanon argues that white man's development and culture generate an “existential digression on the negro” (14).

As Fanon discusses the relationship between white and black people, he comes to the conclusion that “the race must be whitened”(47). This emphasizes the important issue of becoming as much white as possible for white people so that they can enjoy the benefits that whites have. Moreover, he also emphasizes that “we understand now why black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads to the white world” (51). In this regard, Fanon concludes that black people can not be as equal as white people regardless of how much they try to veil their identity and mask their reality. Hence, the blacks have no other option than to

start identifying themselves as whites even at the cost of undermining their own race and leaving themselves alienated from their own culture and identity.

Even after facing racial injustice, oppression and a long separation from his own family, Henry does not go against the system of slavery. Instead he blatantly endorses it and becomes the master of a plantation owning several slaves (the people of his own race). This act is not to get favor from masters but to raise their own low self-esteem and create a distance between themselves and whites whose own position was equally low. Henry's character in the novel expresses the same essence. He craves the position of power and superiority in order to get over his insecurities and inferiority and he does that by stepping on other black people's backs and bringing them down. He as well as other black slave owners in the south feel superior regardless of their racial identity as long as they have subjects under them. According to Katherine Bassard, this behaviour shows "a will to (white) power and privilege as a way of mitigating blackness"(Bassard 408).

Similar to Henry's willingness to upgrade his social and economical strata following the footsteps of whites and owning slaves, Moses also has a yearning to imitate the ones he finds superior to him. His wish of marrying Caldonia and owning Henry's plantation after his death proves Moses's desire to assimilate with his own oppressors and be a part of them as illustrated in the passage below:

That evening was the first time Moses would think that his wife and children could not live in the same world with him and Caldonia. Had they made love in silence, as before, he would not have begun to think beyond himself. But she had spoken of tomorrow, and that meant more tomorrow after that. Where did a slave wife and a slave son fit in with a man who was on his way to being

freed and then marrying a free woman? On his way to becoming Mr. Townsend? (Jones 292-93)

Just as Henry once did, Moses also tries to embrace the system of slavery and wants to become the next Henry of the plantation. This false sense of hope and ambition drives Moses to view his family as an inconvenient obstacle to what he wants, causing him to trick his wife Priscilla and his son Jamie into leaving the plantation forever.

Henry and Moses wield control over the lives of other black individuals, replicating the very system of oppression that once enslaved them. But on the other hand, their own status is flimsy, subject to the whims and legal constraints imposed by white society. Despite these racially and economically subjugated character's effort to be like the superior class - whites/the master, the white culture and law does not really accept them as equals to them. The dynamics between white and black slaveholders are equally confusing. White slave owners like the influential Robbins family view black slaveholders with a mixture of hatred and cautious respect. While recognizing their economic contributions, many white slaveholders struggle to synthesize the presence of black individuals in positions of power. This uneasy relationship is marked by subtle, and sometimes implicit, displays of power, control, and racial superiority. White slaveholders often seek to justify their dominance, even as they work together with black slave owners, undermining the frail nature of black authority within this society. Black slaveholders, in turn, must always deal with these complexities of power dynamics. Figures like Caldonia Townsend, Henry's widow, find themselves wrestling with their own role within this discriminating system. Their interactions with white counterparts are filled with tension, as they strive for recognition and respect while being constantly reminded of their racialized status. These black slaveholders attain a semblance of autonomy, yet it is always shadowed

by the omnipresent reality of their racial identity. The daily lives of those within Manchester County are therefore molded by these multifaceted interactions. The community is a patchwork of alliances, rivalries, and dependencies that cross racial lines. At its core, the county's social fabric reveals the ironic and often tragic entanglements of black and white residents, each striving for survival, power, and identity within the constraints of an inherently unjust society

Henry lives in the delusion that he holds power and authority after becoming a slave owner. However, he still remains a slave to his father by law, since his father had bought him from William Robbins. He is in fact enslaved by the whole system of slavery as he falls into its trap and endorses it himself. Henry's father, Augustus, even though was capable of paying for his and his family's freedom from slavery, ends up being kidnapped and sold back into slavery. Henry Travis and two other patrollers questioned Augustus on his way back home one evening. Travis does not acknowledge when Augustus tells him that he has been free for many years. Travis proves that in slavery, the relationship between a master and a slave can be reestablished easily as he chewed Augustus's paper of freedom and said, "You ain't free less me and the law say you free" (Jones 92 ). His delusion of freedom and power ended just like his life ended as a slave again.

The system of slavery not just affects the black people but also deeply impacts the psyche of whites. They are filled with the inherent feeling of superiority and desire to dominate the ones who are inferior to them. Travis approves of the system that degrades humans and justifies such action in accordance with the law, which is also the product of the white culture and supremacy. But they contradict themselves as they break the law themselves just to fulfill their selfish desires and feed their feelings of false superiority. "Travis holstered his pistol and dismounted and then

Oden dismounted, still pointing the gun at Augustus. But before either of them was well settled on the ground, Stennis had jumped down from the wagon and over to Augustus in one effortless motion. He pulled Augustus from the wagon and began pummeling him”( 95)

Moses also suffered the delusion of freedom and the ambiguity of his identity due to his racial inferiority. He aspires, after Henry's death, to replace him as the freed-black owner of his plantation by marrying Caldonia, Henry's widow. He tries to create a different life for himself within the system of slavery but is never fully able to escape it and the damage it has caused him. Moses's confrontation with Caldonia one evening after they made love shows that he would never be anything above a slave no matter how much he tried. According to the narrator, “He had hoped that by having her again they would cross an irrevocable threshold. But there were no tears and no hint that she wanted him, so he sat in sweat and fumbled through a recitation of their preparations for harvest”(125). but contrary to what he had expected, Moses ends his days trapped in slavery on the plantation, crippled physically and spiritually.

Henry was able to generate some distance between himself and the other slaves or black people by becoming the slave owner. However, he was not able to completely mask the colour of his skin and could never completely belong with the whites. His refusal to visit the slave market emphasizes the insecurity he still had. This example showcases Fanon's Idea of white-gaze and its impact on the psychology of black people. Fanon elaborates that no matter what one does to disguise his/ her racial identity, the appearance/race ultimately determines one's worth: “I'm not given a second chance. I am over determined from the outside. I am a slave not to the “idea” others have of me, but to my appearance” (Fanon 95).

The white-gaze constantly reminds the black people of their inferiority regardless of their social or economic status. The insecurity Henry felt about going to the slave market, where he could be met by other whites, shows how deeply the system of slavery had inflicted people. It is understandable why Henry decides to avoid such situations or events and prefers to exhibit his superiority and 'whiteness' among the ones who are inferior to him. Even as a free man who had the ability to keep slaves for himself, he still had the inferiority instilled inside him. Despite being in a powerful position in the county, Henry had to experience discrimination just because of his skin colour when he fell ill and had to go to the doctor:

The white people's doctor had come the morning of the first day, as a favor to Caldonia's mother, who believed in the magic of white people, but that doctor had only pronounced that Moses's master, Henry Townsend, was going through a bad spell and would recover soon. The ailments of white people and black people were different, and a man who specialized in one was not expected to know much about the other, and that was something he believed Caldonia should know without him telling her. (Jones 4)

The doctor's belief that black and white anatomy was different and a specialization in one may not ensure proper understanding of the other's body and disease precisely shows that whites and blacks were taken as completely different beings. His status as a plantation owner or a slave owner does not make him any equal in the eyes of other white slave owners.

Henry's attempt to climb up the social status in order to get over his inferiority is dismissed by the white culture which makes it impossible for him to escape reality and attain genuine freedom. All of his life is lived in the delusionment of power and identity. Henry realizes his illusioned freedom through his metaphorical dream:

He thought he knew the one they were talking about but as he formed some words to join the conversation, death stepped into the room and came to him; Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of homes, knowing with each step that he did not own it. , that he was only renting . He was ever so disappointed; he heard footsteps behind him and death told him it was Caldonia, coming to register her own disappointment. Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms, but as he traveled throughout the house he found less than four rooms, and all the rooms were identical and his head touched their ceilings. (Jones 11)

Henry thinks he is free and powerful but actually he is not free because his father Augustus bought his freedom from William Robbins and his father is his owner according to the law. His freedom is borrowed and his identity is not exactly what he thinks to be.

The character of Maude, Caldonia's mother, is also another character who gives in to white culture in order to fit in and level her social standing up. As a free black woman herself, Maude not only endorses the system of slavery but is obsessed with it. Even to the extent of poisoning her husband, who was against slavery. She assumes the slaves as her "legacies" and is terrified of losing her legacies, legitimacy and power. This proves her insecurity as an inferior race and thus her willingness to act like the superior race - whites. To her, owning slaves is "the foundation of wealth"(180). This wealth, she believes, secures a position well above the average black people.

Caldonia also falls into the same category of insecure people affected by the racial subjugation. She had the opportunity to give up owning slaves and letting them live a free life after the death of her husband. However, she chooses to continue the

practice and let everything run as it is. Caldonia justifies herself assuming themselves as the mediator of God, believing her husband to be the "shepherd master God had intended" (Jones 180). She takes advantage of her position of a master to boost her spirit and get over her loneliness after her husband's death. However her illusion of power and authority over her slave is deceptional as Moses "weaves the most imaginative story" (273). She doesn't realize that Moses's intention is to get close to her and take over the plantation:

Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* analyzes the novel titled *Nini* written by a senegalese writer Abdoulaye Sadj. The novel exhibits the life of a biracial woman named Nini who desperately wants to become white. In the novel, Sadj describes the excitement Nini feels upon hearing news of a different biracial woman, Dédée, marrying a white man. Fanon notes on this, "Overnight the mulatto girl had gone from the rank of slave to that of master... she was no longer the girl wanting to be white; she was white" (Fanon 41).

As Fanon mentions, the only option that society gives to black people who are struggling with psychological problems related to identity is to "become" white. This is because, in racist culture, whiteness is associated with goodness and wholeness. However, as Fanon has shown, trying to become whiter will of course not help black people. In fact, it will only serve to worsen their feelings of self-hatred and alienation. Just like Nini, Moses's desire was also mainly to replicate Henry's life path like Henry had done before idolizing William Robbins. Moses believes that he can take the place of Henry in the Townsend household and upgrade his social status. During this however, Moses, who started as a slave himself, becomes even more cruel and distant to those below.

Along with the issue of alienation and the problem of identity among the black subjects, *The Known World* also illustrates how these conditions impact people at their neurotic level. As one can see Henry and other characters attempt to transition from the victimized group to the dominant group in order to gain power and freedom. However, they are not able to attain true freedom. Instead, their psyche could be affected as Fanon suggests in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Alice's behaviour is odd and uncanny for the society. She walks around at night, dancing and singing weird songs inflicting fear and horror in the people who see her. There are several events in the novel that show Alice's madness and eerie behavior. Once, Moses follows her in her wildness and sees one of her encounters with the patrollers. "He did not know how far he would follow but less than a half a mile from the plantation he heard the horses galloping toward them. He stepped down into the ravine and could see her and the horses and their men many yards away. Alice lifted her frock and danced and tried to climb onto the horse with one man. The man pushed her away just as the horse reared up (Jones 271).

Due to the bizarre and socially unacceptable behavior that Alice exhibits, the patrollers who are all white men, avoid encountering her. They ignore her as well as her behavior. She also avoids communicating with them and in fact enjoys harrowing them with her craziness. She, in fact, derives power over them from her bizarre and mad behavior. As a result Alice is left alone, to do what she likes; she answers to no one because she is perceived as insane. Her insanity in a way helps Alice construct her own freedom that other slaves who think they are sane, are not able to.

Despite Moses and Henry's effort to fit into the superior strata of the society and pave his way to freedom, They are tangled further into the system of slavery. This is because they have never been able to understand themselves without their relation

to their masters. His delusion of getting rid of his wife and son and living a life of freedom and power is shattered as he ends as a slave in the south and never gets to experience a life of freedom. Henry also dies still bound by slavery. Moses's and Henry's alienation from their race leads them to nowhere.

In conclusion, *The Known World* is a realistic portrayal of the American south during the Antebellum era, when slavery was a major concern and the idea of freedom was just a delusion and identity was always a slippery issue. Throughout the novel, the trope of slavery and racial oppression is used to deepen our understanding of the effects of the system of slavery on individuals and communities as a whole. The humiliation, unjust treatment and oppression experienced by characters in the novel because of their inferior identity and social status lead to the problem of identity, and ambiguity of their idea of freedom. One of the most significant impacts of slavery on the human mind is the illusion of freedom. The black subjects in the novel, whether free or bound by slavery, are all still captive to the system even if they live in the delusion of freedom as slave owners, overseers, or slaves themselves. The desire for power, identity and freedom of people living in the unjust and cruel society entices them to imitate their oppressors, alienate themselves from their own race and ultimately become the oppressor. However, despite their tireless effort to match the superior race and build equal authority in the society, they end up losing consciousness of their identity and are not able to relate completely either to the whites or to the blacks. They live their entire life in the delusionment that they hold power and authority when in fact they are themselves trapped.

This topic is also relevant in Nepal's socio political changes we have come across while delivering the sense of equality and freedom to the oppressed ones. Though the political revolutions have brought changes in status of *dalit* and

marginalized and oppressed, they still find themselves psychologically bound to their fate (socially constructed). In some cases they are even doubly suppressed due to the feudal system still prevalent in remote parts of western Terai. Like our central character is so doomed to the time and circumstances, our people too find it difficult to escape from the unescapable social and cultural conditioning resulting in the problem of identity and delusion of freedom.

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