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A Critical Conspectus of African American Literature in its Historical and Social Stances

Abstract

The present paper has sought to outline the genesis and evolution of the African American literature or, also known as Black American Literature. The study finds that the early narratives of this literature have been characterized by the depiction of slavery and the element of protest. However, it evolved, gradually but firmly, with a distinct declaration of rejection of dejection and abandonment of despair documenting a new Black consciousness through the pens of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois. The paper also studies the social aspect of African American literature and further, attempts to ferret out Black feminism as a conspicuous strand in this literature.

Keywords: Black consciousness, Black culture, Black Power Movement, Post-bellum era, Slavery

Introduction

The very genesis of African American literature lies in the essence of fortifying human dignity and with contending inhuman treatment meted out by African Americans in the racial hierarchy of American society. The literature, imbued with social insight, frames the

evolution of Black American identities and culture. It has passed through such phases as Negro literature, Black literature, Afro-American literature, African American literature and finally, Black American literature. In fact, literature written on slavery is as old as the theory of human civilization. The stories of Aesop are heard in the ancient Greek literature. Likewise, African American literature is as old as the history of the United States.

African American literature has been written by the Black writers of African descent in America. Bruce, Jr. elaborates the social and political framework in which the African American literature was created, “This framework...was the product of complex issues of voice and authority, appropriation and attribution in colonial America and metropolitan Britain...the tendencies and ambiguities of race relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...created the kinds of possibilities and constraints that defined how African Americans sought to influence the larger society or to use writing to establish a place for themselves in it” (1). Blyden Jackson in his book, *A History of Afro-American Literature Vol. I The Long Beginning 1746-1895* gives a useful and interesting historical, political and social background to the entire sweep of Black American literature. He writes, “In any case, Black writers did begin to write in America by the middle of the eighteenth century... They wrote, also, very deliberately as faithful students of the models of literary composition in letters, pamphlets, periodicals, books, and documents of various kinds available to them for their perusal in the written exercises of the whites...” (9).

Depiction of slavery had been the main focus of the most of the early narratives of the literature. Slavery, its perennial effects, and racism have been the main themes of the production of this genre, although slavery was legally abolished in 1865. However, Black writers and artists gave a start to new approaches to literature, music and theatre in Harlem in the 1920s. The Harlem renaissance paved the way for Black writers in the following decades. The civil rights movement made the idea of individual freedom and social justice quite

audible in Black voices of the 1960s. The stream of consciousness, commenced by Phillis Wheatley, continued in the 70s and 80s in the literary texts of Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Rita Dove and Toni Morrison writing back to White supremacy reflecting the representation of trauma, apartheid and its ramifications, sense of identity. Emmanuel S. Nelson writes in the Preface of his book, “*Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*”:

“A most significant development that has taken place on the global literary scene during the last two decades or so is the dramatic emergence of African American voices as a distinct and dominant force. This force has been gathering momentum since the 1950s, when James Baldwin published some of his most compelling works, and Ralph Ellison stunned the literary establishment with his dazzling *Invisible Man* (1952)...And the publication of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 marked a nodal point in the literary history of the United States: with a voice as original as America itself, she began to conquer the English language and redefine the international literary landscape. Along with Toni Morrison scores of African American fiction writers, poets, playwrights, autobiographers, and essayists have mapped bold new territories; they have firmly entrenched themselves in the forefront of contemporary American literature” [iii].

In fact, African American literature carries an intricate connection with African American history. African American literature, as a genre, “testified against [African slaves’] captors,” “bore witness to the urge to be free and literate, [and]...embraced the European Enlightenment’s dream of reason and the American Enlightenment’s dream of civil liberty” (Gates and McKay, *The Norton*xxxvi). This growing body of work meant that the African was indeed human and should not be enslaved. The “Black voice” (xiv) that Wheatley aimed to discover and ascertain is the same voice that is present in the works of artists like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison. Indeed the element of protest in the literature

symbolizes the changing attitudes to socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-religious situation, priorities and concern of writers with changing times from the past to present. There has been a close interaction or relationship between *politics* and creative expressions and literature has been used as armour against the established socio-Political norms, dehumanizing forces, dull and dreary customs, exploitation and hypocrisy.

2.1 Documenting the Conditions of Slavery

Like African American history, African American literature has its origin before the emergence of America as an independent country. Bruce, Jr. traces its inception in the second half of the 18th century “as the product of complex issues of voice and authority, appropriation and attribution in colonial America and metropolitan Britain” (1). The African American writers sought to claim human rights and equality as declared by the proposition “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence. Phillis Wheatley, “widely conceived as prodigy and progenitor of the African American literary tradition” (Jarret 143), dedicated her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), the first African American book, proving that ‘*Negros, Black as Cain,*’ were not inherently inferior to whites in matters of the spirit and thus could “join th’ angelic train” as spiritual equals to whites... Early African American authors such as Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Lucy Terry, David Walker, and James M. Whitfield produced the earliest Black literary works and “challenged the dominant culture’s attempt to segregate the religious from the political, the spirit from the flesh” (Andrews and Foster 152).

African American literary tradition seems to start with the beginning of slavery in America. The human instinct to be free could not remain suppressed for long and literature became the carrier of this instinct. The experience of being slave and exploited became the main theme of their work. As a consequence, a subgenre of African American literature

which began in the middle of the 19th century i.e. the slave narrative came into existence. From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the slave narrative swayed the literary scenario of post civil war Black America. Slave narratives can be broadly categorized into three distinct forms: tales of religious redemption, tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle, and tales of progress. The tales written to inspire the abolitionist struggle are the most famous because they tend to have a strong autobiographical motif. Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass wrote slave narratives to give true account of slavery. In 1845, Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* offered a significant break from tradition by not allowing his story to be written, transcribed, or edited by a White supporter as was often the practice during the time. *Written by Himself* marked the beginning of a show of independence and self-reliance that had not been evident in the Black literary community before. The era also saw the emergence of Black women slave narrators such as Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. These authors gave new dimension to African American literature, bringing a Black woman's insight and perspective to the forefront in a way that male authors had previously failed to do" (Gates and McKay, *The Norton* 159-160). Frederick Douglass's autobiography is reckoned among two of the best known slave narratives including *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861). This work, the first autobiography by a formerly enslaved African American woman, unveils her confrontation of the sexual exploitation and delineates oppressive slavery problematizing the living conditions for Black women.

2.2 Redefining Black Self Consciousness

The expansion of educational opportunity among African Americans in the post-bellum era made a ground for a self-conscious approach among the Black middle class. This stream of consciousness continued to flow in the non-fiction works also after the end of slavery and the American Civil War. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and Booker T.

Washington (1856–1915) were the leading African American intellectuals and authors of their time. One of the original founders of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1909), W. E. B. Du Bois, published one of the most provocative and influential works of African American literature in the 20th century, titled *The Souls of the Black Folk* containing Du Bois' famous quote: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (17). An uncompromising advocate of civil and voting rights, Du Bois asserted in *The Souls of Black Folk* that through "work, culture, and liberty" the dual heritage of African Americans—what he called "double-consciousness"—could be melded into a force for positive social and cultural change in the United States (15, 9). Graham and Ward, Jr. write in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, "Postbellum America frames an era commonly understood as the "dawn of freedom," the years between 1865 and 1910, which presented new conditions for forging an entirely new literature of necessity. It is not surprising that during Reconstruction (1865–77) the contradiction between the possibility of a fully realized freedom and the threat of new forms of oppression and discrimination fueled enormous debates. African American literature after the Civil War begins to shift its racial discourse in order to (1) promote racial and moral uplift, social progress, and solidarity; (2) gain an identifiable, if not authoritative presence in mainstream America; and (3) exercise greater control over the representation of self" (9).

2.3 Reconstructing and Celebrating Black Culture and Art

The Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937), an important cultural event in the history of African Americans, brought the revival of Black art and culture in various fields like jazz (music), visual arts, literary, cultural and theatre as numerous Black musicians, artists and others composed remarkable works; the renaissance is perhaps best known for the literature that came out of it. The Black creative arts started receiving acclamation unheeded erstwhile.

Langston Hughes, a poet, is one of the famous writers of the renaissance whose work contributed to the vibrant Black urban culture. W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Zora Neale Hurston were influential writers of the renaissance. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Hurston is one of the important compositions of African American writing. Although her writings were not recognized for decades, Hurston was later discovered as a role model for all African American women writers by Alice Walker in her essay “Looking for Zora” in the 1970s.

2.4 Searching for Justice through Discourse on Race

Civil Rights Era in African American Literature is a milestone in the odyssey of Black identity. In the book *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, Robin D. J. Kelley and Earl Lewis write;

“When the 1960s came to a close most Black people were surprisingly optimistic. The civil rights movement had made remarkable gains, and many people believed that the Black Power movement might achieve for African Americans the self determination they had been seeking for the past three centuries. And there were some stunning victories, especially in the arena of electoral politics” (xvii).

A large migration of African Americans, which began during World War I, generated a new sense of independence in the Black community. It also had a strengthening impact on the American Civil Rights movement, which took Black writers during the 1940s, 50s and 60s under its influence. James Baldwin in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Richard Wright in *Native Son* (1940), and Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952) aimed to discourse the issues of race and identity in their writings. Gwendolyn Brooks is an important name in the series of Black feminist writers who paved the way to the search for justice. Along with Brooks, other female poets who became well known during the 1950s and 60s are Nikki Giovanni and

Sonia Sanchez. The issues of racism, racial exploitation, and other aspects of African American life were addressed by the authors of the age.

1. Social Aspects of African American Literature

Several social as well as political movements played a crucial role in literary evolution of African Americans/ African American culture. Movements like Civil Rights Movement (1955), started by Martin Luther King came up to rebel against racism. Black Panthers, Students Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and others came up for Black liberation. The Black Arts Movement, following the assassination of Malcolm X, has been tagged as “the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement” (Smethurst 14). Usually referred to as a "sixties" movement, the movement came together in 1965 and broke apart around 1975. In 1968, poetry, fiction, essays and drama, by the writers associated with the movement, appeared in the anthology *Black Fire*, edited by Baraka and Larry Neal. The thoughts of James T. Stewart, in this anthology, denotes the spirit of the Black Arts Movement, “The Black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality...must be consistent with a Black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles” (Stewart 3). Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, Hoyt W. Fuller and Rosa Guy were the significant writers of the movement. Neal drafts “its goals as the promotion of self-determination, solidarity and nationhood among African Americans. To Black Arts writers, literature was frankly a means of exhortation, and poetry was the most immediate way to model and articulate the new Black consciousness the movement sought to foster” (Wallenfeldt 60). “Black Arts Movement set the tone for a new era in the lives of many African Americans. The main aim for African American writers was to write literature that enthroned Blackness” (Gates and McKay, *The Norton* 1367).

3.1 The Black Feminist Movement

Another movement, the Black Feminist Movement, however, extends and disapproves the Black Arts Movement. The authors like Sonia Sanchez, Paule Marshall, Gwendolyn Brooks and Toni Morrison, hook these two movements. The probe in to the preoccupations of feminism all over the world seems necessary to study the Black Feminism /feminist perspective. The terms feminist and feminism were imported from French to English in 1894 and 1895 respectively. Feminism slowly emerged out of newly-acquired social consciousness of some enlightened men and women.

The Feminist Movement falls into three phases or more precisely in three 'Waves'. The first Wave refers to feminist movement in 19th and early 20th century. During the First Wave, Feminists focuses primarily on women's right to vote, education, better working conditions and men's double standards of morality. Mary Wollstonecraft, known as first feminist philosopher, has to her credit one of the earliest milestones of feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1872). Virginia Woolf is another name in this field whose work *A Room of One's own* (1929) reveals her conviction that a woman should have resources and independence to use her creative potential in producing the works as fine as those of Shakespeare. The Second Wave of Feminism (1950s-1980s) focuses more vigorously on gender inequalities in laws and culture. *The Second Sex* (1944) by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, and *Women's Estate* by Juliet Mitchell are some representative texts of this period. The third wave starts in 1990s due to some perceived failures of the Second Wave. The movement now has a propensity to be more wide-ranging by reaching over and taking into notice of the miscellaneous needs of women belonging to different races and communities.

The feminist movement is, now, a universal phenomenon as it permeates through all the countries and cultures, race and ethnicity. The Black feminist movement came into

existence as the Black Liberation Movement and Women's Movement were not able to meet the needs of Black women who were treated as other racially in women's movement and faced gender based discrimination in the Black liberation movement. The term, Black, encompassed in its arena Black men and the term, woman, just White women. Consequently, Black women remained neglected and undefined. The aim of the Black Feminist movement was to establish a tradition which could talk of the plight of Black women along with suggesting the way to cease the discrimination based on race, gender and class.

Valerie Smith describes three ways how Afro-American criticism, historically, dealt with the issues of, "in a biographical framework permeated by sexual stereotypes of women; in assertions of male authority within the Black Arts Movement; and in ostensibly gender-blind literary history that did not give equal status to Black women's texts" (Smith 484). Anna Julia Cooper's book, *'A Voice from the South'* (1892) can be considered to be one of the eloquent texts of the Black feminist movement. In this text, Cooper pleads for the recognition of the Black women's voice and offers an open challenge to the Black male authors. Ever since the publication of Cooper's text, Black feminist literary theory movement has measured a long route and has been shaped by various writers to establish itself as a genre of Black women's writing. Since the 1970s, with the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Bambara's anthology, *The Black Woman*, Black Women writers have been continuously transcribing in the Afro-American literary activity.

3.2 'Womanism' and Black Socio-cultural Movements

Alice Walker's theory of *Womanism* has been a remarkable output of the Black feminist movement. Many writers defined Black feminist movement but Alice Walker is considered unique among them, defining Black feminist movement as "Womanism". Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" defines "womanist" as is "a Black

feminist or feminist of color” (Walker xi). “The Black Woman” says Alice Walker “is one of America’s greatest heroes...Not enough credit has been given to the Black women who have been oppressed beyond recognition” (as noted by Sinha 46). The year 1970 beheld a wave of African American women’s writing challenging the African American male literary tradition, with the publication of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes, “This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet independent of the Black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison” (*Reading Black 2*).

Although the surge of creative vigour of African American women, especially in fiction, started quite earlier than Morrison’s appearance on the scene, her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is generally seen as one of its milestone texts. The first Black American woman to win a Nobel Prize for Literature, “Toni Morrison has advanced the African American literary canon by producing unselfconscious works about the experiences of Blacks in America for a Black audience. Yet in spite of the specificity of her subject matter, her novels, some of which have been translated into other languages, have earned a heartfelt popular and critical approval through their universal appeal” (Anderson, *The Guardian*).

Conclusion

To conclude, African American literature, however, seems to have commenced with slavery in America. The literature became an instrument used to voice the injustices African American experienced and observed, and written language—especially the slave narrative—was a valuable tool for black authors who strove to end slavery through the dissemination of antislavery propaganda throughout the North and South. In the early 19th century, the prominent texts of African American literature spoke with heightening urgency of the need for whites to address the sin of slavery. As a consequence, a subgenre of African American

literature which began in the middle of the 19th century i.e. the slave narrative came into existence. From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the fugitive slave narrative dominated the literary landscape of antebellum black America. Late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the pivotal place of black women in the broad-gauged reform movements in black communities of the post-Reconstruction era. Several social as well as political movements, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights movement and Black Arts Movement, played a crucial role in the literary evolution of African Americans goaled to seek the promotion of self-determination, solidarity, and nationhood among African Americans. In the late 20th century, the surge of creative vigour of African American women writers also punctuated the literary scenario of African American literature as Black women writers created their own space of existence that was left unheeded by the Black Liberation movement and the Women's movement, both. To sum up, the Black literary texts, definitely, create a space where social justice is envisioned, constructed and very much desired. One of the main components of feminist literary texts is a message about the necessity for a society in which women in general, and women of colour, are seen not as a hindrance, but as vital members of the culture(s) they inhabit. And this message is overtly embedded in the African American literature.

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