

**PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND
SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH**



**UNIVERSITY OF Tlemcen
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

***African American Literature from The
Seventieth Century Till The Ninetieth Century***

**Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English as a Partial
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Anglo-Saxon
Literature and Civilization.**

Presented by :

Mr.Abd al hakim Sobhi

Supervised by :

Mrs.Souad HAMIDI

Board of examiners

Dr.Faiza SNOUSI President (University of Tlemcen)

Mrs.Souad HAMIDI Supervisor (University of Tlemcen)

Dr.Yahia ZEGHOUDI Examiner (University of Tlemcen)

Academic Year: 2016-2017

Dedications

*Before all, I thank *Allah* for helping me to achieve*

this work which I dedicate:

*To my mother who is the source of affection and
model*

Of success.

To my lovely sisters: Nadia and Nawel

To my beloved brothers: Rafik

Sofiane and Karim

To all my friends : faicel, Nasro and Faicel

*Great thanks to “Nadia” who supported me and
encouraged me to believe in myself and helped me in
every moment.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost thanks to “ALLAH” the greatest for helping me in realizing this research work.

I am immensely grateful to my supervisor Mrs.Souad HAMIDI for here sincere commitment, endless patience, suggestions and advice, her support and encouragements throughout the development of this research.

Special thanks are due to all the members of the jury including Dr.Faiza SNOUSI, Dr.Yahia ZEGHOUDI for reading this research, and providing evaluative comments.

Special thanks also go to the teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages for their help and support.

Abstract

In America, racism spread around the country especially in the South. Black people were treated offensively. They did not have full rights as the white citizens. Due to these facts, many black writers responded with a set of literary works and used their skills in writing to reflect on their life. Thus, they have reached an artistic level and produced creative works. African American literature involves poetry and slave narratives. The Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements played great roles in the development of African American writing. Nowadays, African American literature constitutes a basis in the literature of the United States. This study is an attempt to give a clear view to the reader on how African American literature developed and changed throughout time.

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List of acronyms

CORE : the Congress of Racial Equality

NCNW : National Council of Negro Women

General Introduction

African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture. It is only with the significant representation of African American literature that American society stands to be cleansed from the problem of racial discrimination. African American literature has examined the problem of racial discrimination in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects. It has traveled from mid 17th century with slave narratives to the current times with all its socio-literary exuberance initiating a literary and cultural transformation in the fabric of American society.

Thus, this research work is an attempt to deal with the emergence of African American Literature which has appeared due to some historical events. It provides the readers with an overview of this kind of literature starting from the seventeenth century with the importation of African slaves by Europeans till the nineteenth century which was described by the development of African American works in the area of literature. On the basis of these considerations a research question have been formulated for the present study :

- What are the reasons of the development of the African American Literature?

This question would lead to the formulation of the following research hypothesis :

- Racism and equality, are very likely to be one of the reasons of the development of African American Literature .

Therefore, the current research work is divided into two interrelated chapters. The first chapter provides historical background of African American literature then, it deals with the main African American movements from the colonial to the contemporary field.

General Introduction

The second chapter starts with a description of the different literary genres, themes and writers from the early African American literature to the twentieth century African American literature. In addition to black writers' works such as slave narratives and autobiographies, drama, poetry and fiction that gave diversity to the literary genres of the period.

Also this chapter mentions some famous writers of the twentieth century and their works which are considered as essential. Furthermore, it shows the appearance of women writers who reached a high level in writing and gained the highest literary rewards. This chapter explains the features of twentieth century African American literature.

Since the early twentieth century, the African American novel has focused on the themes of migration and racial confrontation as well as the struggle for human and civil rights.

1.1. Introduction :

This research work deals with African American literature. In America precisely in the South, African slavery in America is a controversial subject in society and in history. It brings forth feelings of guilt in populations in the West, whose ancestors hundreds of years ago may have participated in the buying and selling of fellow human beings. These social and historical events pushed many African Americans to be poets and writers. Their journey dates back from the colonial period till the present. They want to get social justice and freedom.

The first chapter of this research work provide a historical background, definitions and the main achievements of black writers from the colonial period till the present. Moreover, the main literary movements are listed. It is also important for the readers to know the reasons behind the appearance of black literature.

1.2. The Historical Background (from 17 century till 20 century)

African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture. The strong presence of African American literature has paved the way for the emergence of Native American, Asian American, and Chicano American streams of literatures. Before understanding the origin of African American literature, it is necessary to know the main problems of that period. The problem of race and tensions of color pushed African Americans to use writing to establish a place for themselves in that community. The English contributed to the issue of segregation. They had developed the concept of inferiority and distinction through drawing on preconceptions rooted in images of blackness and physical differences between the two peoples (Bruce 02). Those negative images were created by English adventurers and traders who visited the African Continent. The literature read at that time in England offered a negative portrayal of Africans and their ways of life. The Africans were described as ruthless and cruel and even as ugly people. Early in the 18th century, laws excluded the testimony of the black in court particularly in the South. In many colonies, the free black paid punitive taxation and were prohibited from having property. In Virginia, some blacks lost the right to vote African Americans were given different names like 'Colored' 'Negros' 'Black' and 'African American'. In fact, African American literature embodies novels, poems and plays showing the status of race as a whole. The writers' works reflect their identities (Warren 05).

African American literature presents a wide range of writings from the colonial period to the present. It is related to different literary periods: The colonial period (1746-1800), antebellum period (1800-1865), the reconstruction period (1865-1900), the protest movement (1960-1969) and contemporary period (1970-present).

Early in the 18th century, laws excluded the testimony of the black in court especially in the South. In several colonies, the free black paid punitive taxation and were prohibited from owning property. In Virginia, some blacks lost the right to vote. They were brought against their will and many wives were separated from their husbands and were given to others (64).

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1.2.1 The Colonial Period (1746-1800) :

Within the span of a hundred years, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a tide of emigration swept from Africa to America. This movement, impelled by powerful and diverse motivations, shaped the character and destiny of an continent. One of the captured slaves who were transported to colonial America was Wheatley. In her writings, she focuses on the contrast between slavery and freedom (Jarrett 22).

Because of racism, many African-American writings were not accepted as authentic works such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Through poetry, sermons, letters and slave narratives, African American literature of the colonial period was a means of breaking the bonds of slavery. In New England, those slaves who were close with their masters' families exchanged stories. They

described their lives before slavery in Africa and their daily activities. Those stories suggest a kind of awareness of the issues of slavery (Dickson 20).

The issue of slavery and the revolutionary war led to the development of African American writings. Their poems and letters reflect the African Americans' suffering

1.2.2 The Antebellum Period (1800-1865)

During The Antebellum Period many black slaves focused on the narration of their stories such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Well Brown. At that time literature was an instrument for the abolition of slavery. It consists of abolitionists' poems and slaves' narrations which show injustice and bondage of slavery. During this period, many abolitionist newspapers appeared such as *The Liberator*, which gave a chance to the slaves to tell their stories. For instance, William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *the liberator* and Lydia Maria Child edited Harriet Jacob's *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Jones 37). The Antebellum Period in American history is generally considered to be the period before the civil war and after the War of 1812. It was characterized by the rise of abolition and the gradual polarization of the country between abolitionists and supporters of slavery.

During the nineteenth century, Blacks decided to revolt against the situation. There were strong leaders such Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner in Virginia. Unfortunately, many rebels failed and their leaders were executed. Slaves had a reputation as recalcitrant (38).

In this aspect, Jacobs says :

Never witnessed such scenes can hardly believe what I know was inflicted at this time on innocent men, women and children against whom there was not the slightest ground for suspicion-colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered in an especial manner.

The Antebellum period gave a chance for feminist writers to participate in the fight against slavery with black men writers. Moreover, it is the period of mixture between written and oral tradition in African American literature which represented the slaves' desire for freedom (Smith & Jones 39). The Antebellum Period had a profound effect on the course of American history, including westward expansion to the Pacific, a population shift from farms to industrial centers, sectional divisions that ended in civil war, the abolition of slavery and the growth of feminist and temperance movements.

1.2.3 The Reconstruction Period (1865-1900)

In the Reconstruction era, there was a great emphasis on education and literacy for the purpose of obtaining freedom socially, economically or politically. Black slaves were illiterate. For this reason, many schools were established to teach the writing and reading skills (Worth 05).

Many African Americans deployed their pens and their voices to defend blacks' political freedom. During the Reconstruction period African American literature includes the oral traditions such as sermons, speeches, spirituals song and stories whose functions were to promote equality.

Through the slave narrative, African Americans entered the world of prose and dramatic literature. In 1853 William Wells Brown, an internationally

known fugitive slave narrator, authored the first black American novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*. It tells the tragic story of the beautiful light-skinned African American daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress; Clotel dies trying to save her own daughter from slavery.

Many writers in the reconstruction period tried to integrate the oral and written traditions by merging black dialects in their literature. They used vernacular expressions in their works to capture the voices of the audience.

For instance, Paul Laurence Dunbar is a poet who wrote *Sympathy* (1899) which emphasizes on the African American struggle for dignity and equality. In *Sympathy*, Dunbar says:

I know what the caged bird feels, Alas!
When the sun is bright on the up land slopes
When the wind stirs flows like a stream of glass
And the river flows like a stream of glass
When the first bird sings and the first but steals
I know what the caged bird feels! (Quoted in
Smith & Jones 155)

Thus, the caged bird represents the African American artists who attempt to use art as a means of achieving freedom.

Throughout reconstruction, African American slaves got freedom. As a result, they could acquire education and owned land. However, by the end of the 19th century the reconstruction ended. Thus, the whites violated these civil rights. The Jim Crow system revealed racial segregation. It entailed disenfranchisement of African Americans. Its function was to maintain white above all African Americans (Haggard xvii). The whites employed violence to maintain dominance over the African Americans.

1.2.4 Harlem Renaissance (1900-1940)

Traditionally the Harlem Renaissance was viewed primarily as a literary movement centered in Harlem and growing out of the black migration and the emergence of Harlem as the premier black metropolis in the United States.

The period of Harlem Renaissance is supposed to be the Golden Age of African American literature “It is a movement in music, art, literature and politics from the early 1900’s to 1940’s, emphasized the importance of freedom-political ,economic, social and artistic - for African Americans”(Smith & Jones 163).

During the period between 1900 and 1940, the demand for human rights increased. African American soldiers risked their lives in the First World War (1914-1918) for the sake of freedom After their return, many African Americans called for the civil rights. The leaders of Harlem Renaissance were young artists and writers of the new generation. They wanted to prove their qualities and were proud of being blacks. They were trying to stay out of the political issue (163).

The Harlem Renaissance (the New Negro Movement) was the most important event in twentieth-century African American intellectual and cultural life. While best known for its literature, it touched every aspect of African American literary and artistic creativity from the end of World War I through the Great Depression. Literature, critical writing, music, theater, musical theater, and the visual arts were transformed by this movement; it also affected politics, social development, and almost every aspect of the African American experience.

1.2.5 The Protest Era (1940-1959)

The main purpose of the protest period is to face racial discrimination and segregation, or the separation of whites and blacks, in almost every aspect of their lives. These protests were for the sake of gaining freedom from slavery (Smith & Jones 468).

Throughout this period, there was a great emphasis on the economic issues. Because of the depression, African Americans experienced worse economic situation. African American writers had difficulties in obtaining funds to develop their writing career. According to Smith and Jones:

Literature that had protest as a purpose was especially distasteful to white readers who were not ready to face the realities of racism. The issue of racism continued to the Second World War due to the segregation between black and white soldiers (469).

Furthermore, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) fought to end long-standing political, social, economic, and legal practices that discriminated against black Americans. In 1935 Mary McLeod Bethune established the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) to tackle the concerns of black woman. These organizations called for the human and civil rights. Also, they asked for the right to fight as full citizens in the armed forces during the Second World War (Beaulieu 262).

1.2.6 The Contemporary Period (1960- Present)

The period lasting from 1960 to 1969 is referred to as the black aesthetics movement. This period was marked by the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Nationalist Movement and the Women's Movement. It was known as "Black Power Movement". During this period, black artists used multiple genres to make change in society.

The student movement was the next major social change movement to develop in the 1960s. Many of its early organizers had first become politically active in the early 1960s working along side blacks in civil rights protests. Composed mainly of white college students, the student movement worked primarily to fight racism and poverty, increase student rights.

The contemporary women's movement began in the late 1960s. Many women who participated in the movement had also worked in earlier movements, where they had often been relegated to menial tasks, such as photocopying and answering phones. Some began to protest these roles and to question the traditional roles for women in U.S. society. During the 1950s and early 1960s, society pressured women to marry, have children, and then remain at home to raise those children.

From 1970 till now, the American society changed.. In this period, black literature became an important part of university curriculum (743). Also, African American women's voices began to be heard as a result of the women's movement and Civil Right Movement. The most prominent writers were: Du Bois, Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sutton Griggs and James Weldon Johnson (745).

1.3 The Main Literary Movements

African American Literature started from Africans who have suffered, struggled, damaged, permanently scared, depressed, a cry for help and wrote just to get their point of across to the white audience to prevail to for a graceful and vibrant. African American writers represent novelists, short story writers, poets and playwrights. They are represented in American literary movements including realism, naturalism and modernism.

1.3.1 African American Literary Realism (1865-1914)

Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life. William Dean Howells refers to American realism as "the truthful presentation of materials" (01).

In American literature, the term "realism" encompasses the period of time from the Civil War to the turn of the century during which William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Mark Twain, and others wrote fiction devoted to accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts.

In this period, black authors did not focus on main stream realism which exposes race relation in the South to maintain the white audience. The main realistic authors were Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Thus, black writers produced a literature that portrays blacks as

deserving equality with whites. As a result, they mixed between romance and realism (Jarrett 189).

Some critics generally associate realism with a realistic setting, an unobtrusive narration and a focus on the characters' psychological development. Realistic authors use the language to create disgust toward black mistreatment. Realistic African writers' works are based on observations of the aspects of African American life including criminality and illiteracy (189).

1.3.2 African American Naturalism

Naturalism found its greatest number of practitioners in America shortly before and after the turn of the twentieth century. Naturalism sought to go further and be more explanatory than Realism.

Naturalism displayed some very specific characteristics that delimit it from the contemporary literature that was merely realistic. The environment, especially the social environment, played a large part in how the narrative developed. The locale essentially becomes its own character, guiding the human characters in ways they do not fully realize.

Naturalism had shown African American writers such as Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. These writers tried to avoid rebellion, anger and protest. They were influenced by the philosophy of naturalism which helped them to develop their own versions of human rights. They attempted to liberate their fellow human beings from rules imposed on them.

Different black writers like Ellison began to accept that literary naturalism was a burden. It was not a technique for expressing African American reality. In this context, Pizer maintain that "naturalism in its own day was often viewed as a threat to the established order because it boldly and vividly depicted the inadequacies of the industrial system which was the foundation of that order" (201).

1.3.3 African American Modernism

Modernism is a trend of philosophical thought arising from the widespread changes in culture and society in the age of modernity. American modernism is an artistic and cultural movement in the United States beginning at the turn of the 20th century, with a core period between World War I and World War II.

American modernism benefited from the diversity of immigrant cultures. Artists were inspired by African, Caribbean, Asian and European folk cultures and embedded these exotic styles in their works.

In the world of art, generally speaking, Modernism was the beginning of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art. The educational reforms of the Victorian Age had led to a rapid increase in literacy rates, and therefore a greater demand for literature of all sorts.

In the modernist era, the use of African American music in written works did not present the author's awareness of racial subjects. Actually, music such as blues and jazz was used by authors for different purposes including social commentary and political protest. Thus, there is a relation between music and literature. Hence, music or jazz in particular reflected the hopes of African Americans for finding a new life (15).

1.3.4 The Neorealism Movement (1970-present)

Neorealism or structural realism is a theory of international relations that says power is the most important factor in international relations.

At the beginning of the 1950's, neorealism exerted an influence on a number of European literatures and on filmmaking in many countries including the socialist countries. Similar tendencies in the art of Western European countries (France, Great Britain, West Germany) were sometimes also called Neorealist.

Neorealism survived in individual films of subsequent years and, at the beginning of the 1970's, again became prominent in the progressive tendency known as political cinema.

During this phase, there was variety in African American literature. All the genres were presented. The most known African American women writers of the twentieth century are Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor (745).

African American neorealists believe that blacks are social beings who must not to be separated from the; social and historical context which develops their potential and highlights their significance as individuals and giving them more hope (Dickson-Carr 177).

1.4 Conclusion

African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture.

It is only with the significant representation of African American literature American society stands to be cleansed from the problem of racial discrimination. African American literature has examined the problem of racial discrimination in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects.

It has traveled from mid 18th century with slave narratives to the current times with all its socio literary exuberance initiating a literary and cultural transformation in the fabric of American society .

Their works such as poetry, autobiographies, fiction and essays helped to form the African American literature. The next chapter will deal with twentieth century African American literature.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter tries to give a general view of contemporary African American literature. First by describing the background of the historical events that identify its development.

Then, it focuses on famous African American writers of the period. The reader is provided with a presentation of some authors' works. The chapter will include African American writers, the main themes in contemporary African American literature.

2.2 Historical Background of Contemporary African American literature

Important developments in African American literature during the last three decades of the twentieth century include the overwhelming success of many African American women writers, as well as a growth in the number of authors who have found that they can straddle more than one genre. The works of black writers appear more frequently as bestsellers, and at times, works of several African American authors appear concurrently on the lists. African American writing has become more legitimized in the United States, and African American studies departments have emerged in many universities around the country.

One of the first books of the contemporary renaissance of African American literature was Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). It was perhaps one of the greatest African American writing coups of the late twentieth century. With Haley's book, as well as the highly popular television miniseries that followed, many black Americans have been encouraged to discover their own African roots. Since then, other books that explore the history of African Americans in the American West, the South, and the North have been published and eagerly received by African Americans.

Numerous African American women write in response to the Black Arts movement, protesting the role that they feel women played in the male-oriented black nationalist movement.

Contemporary African American literature changed the world. Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her masterpiece regarding the slave era. A new generation of writers appeared. They were the first African American writers to produce works in the post- Civil Rights era. In the twentieth century African American literature was prominent. Contemporary writers asked new questions and represented new ways of discovering their society. “African American literature is a living dialogue of ideas; contemporary African American literature is a lively discussion” (King & Moody-Turner 01).

Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and her other works have been resurrected and used as inspiration. The women's liberation movement also supports these women by allowing their works to reach a wider audience. In this way, the somewhat female-repressive politics of the Black Arts movement has provoked women writers to express their own unique voices. Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Gloria Naylor are examples of successful women novelists who have become prominent figures in the publishing world. Autobiographer and poet Maya Angelou is another major literary figure.

Since the 1980s, African American women writers have been at the leading edge of the publishing industry—in quality as well as quantity of work. In addition to Walker, Jones, Morrison, McMillan, and Naylor, other prominent women working primarily as novelists include Edwidge Danticat, Gwendolyn Parker, Jamaica Kincaid, Lucinda Roy, Marita Golden, Bernice McFadden, Toni Cade Bambara, Diane McKinney-Whetstone, Helen Lee, Yolanda Joe, Dawn Turner Trice, Pearl Cleage, and Barbara Chase-Riboud. While African American male writers are outnumbered by black women writers, among the contemporary African American male novelists are Ernest Gaines, Ishmael Reed, Walter Mosley, John Edgar Wideman, Albert French, E. Lynn Harris, Colson Whitehead, Darryl Pinckney, Brian Keith Jackson, Trey Ellis, Brent Wade, and Clarence Major. African American novelists often confront issues of identity, offering interpretations of womanhood and manhood. Challenged by W.E.B. Du Bois's statement about dual identity as an American and as a black person, they collectively provide panoramic insight into African American life.

African American writing during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is autobiography. Memoirs and autobiographies have become a popular mode of expression, especially for non-professional writers, entertainers, athletes, educators, ministers, civil rights leaders, politicians, physicians, attorneys, motivational speakers, and relatives of celebrities have written their life stories.

Contemporary African American literature is characterized by tension as Shockley suggests that:

we should think of contemporary African American literature not in terms of how texts do or do not conform to one aesthetic; rather, we should consider how the African American literary tradition is characterized by multiple aesthetics accompanied by varied and diverse, rather than monolithic, strategies for grappling with questions of race, gender, identity and tradition (02)

In other words, contemporary African American writers tackle subjects in a different way to express criticism and produce a debate.

2.3 Contemporary African American writers

The Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements take a great role in the development of African American literature. Many famous black writers appeared including Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Cullen, Wright, Ellison, Baldwin Amiri Baraka . They wrote about their personal experiences and the blacks situation in the American society. They used their fiction and poetry to end segregation and protect civil rights.

2.3.1 W.E.B.Du Bois (1868-1963)

Scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. In 1895, he became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University.

Racism was the main target of Du Bois's polemics, and he strongly protested against lynching, and discrimination in education and employment. His cause included people of color everywhere, particularly Africans and Asians in colonies. In 1903, Du Bois published his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of 14 essays. This book is a work of sociology rather than fiction. He gives a description of the consciousness of black people who struggle to be both American and Negro (Oakes 114). Du Bois became interested in Africa. He says:

This Africa is not a country. It is a world, a universe of itself and for itself, a thing different. Immense ... It is a great black bosom where the spirit longs to die. It is life, so burning so fire encircled that one bursts with terrible soul inflaming life (211).

Moreover, he wrote three novels of *his Black Flame* which has a relationship with the study of America (High 212). In his *Dusk of Dawn* (1903), Du Bois affirms that he was born with “a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit Dutch, but, thanks God, no Anglo-Saxon” (114). He believed that the race problem was a result of ignorance and he was determined to get as much knowledge as he could.

He believed that the race problem was a result of ignorance and he was determined to get as much knowledge as he could.

2.3.2 Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. Langston Hughes was an American poet, novelist, and playwright whose African-American themes made him a primary contributor to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Also he was interested in the jazz and blues of black music. In ‘Dream Variations’ (1922), He says:

Dance! Whir! Whir
Till the quickday is done
Night coming tenderly
Black like me. (213)

He published his first poem in 1921. In 1940, Hughes published, *The Big Sea*, Also Hughes began contributing a column to the *Chicago Defender*.

In the fifties, his works represented anger and a warning to the white claiming that if the black do not get their social justice, there might be an explosion of black violence. In this sense, he states:

What happens to a dream deferred
Does it dry up
Like a raisin like a sore
Or fester like a sore
And then run?
Or does it explode? (214)

The late 1940s, Hughes contributed the lyrics for a Broadway musical titled *Street Scene*, which featured music by Kurt Weill Over the next two decades, Hughes would continue his prolific output. In 1949 he wrote a play that inspired the opera *Troubled Island* and published yet another anthology of work, *The Poetry of the Negro*. Langston works do not directly attack the white society, but he uses soft protests (213). Hughes asks for human rights.

2.3.3 Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

Countee Cullen is one of the most representative voices of the Harlem Renaissance. His life story is essentially a tale of youthful exuberance and talent of a star

that flashed across the African American firmament and then sank toward the horizon, he was a prominent African-American poet, novelist, children's writer, and playwright.

Color is the name of Countee Cullen's first published book and color is, rightly in every sense its prevailing characteristic. Cullen discusses heavy topics regarding race and the distance of ones heritage from their motherland and how it is lost. In his works, Cullen talks about love, beauty and life. Cullen's works make the readers feel the pain of being black in America. He claims that:

So, in the dark, we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our organizing seeds (214)

In poems such as "Heritage" and "Atlantic City Waiter," Cullen reflects the urge to reclaim African arts—a movement called Négritude that was one of the motifs of the Harlem Renaissance.

Throughout his lifetime, Cullen represent the desire to be regarded only as a poet and not a Negro poet. In this context, he told a New York reporter: "I want to be known as a poet and not as a Negro poet" (16) Moreover, Cullen says:

Most things I write I do for the sheer love of the music in them.
Somehow I find my poetry of it treating of the Negro, of his joys
and his sorrows mostly of the latter- and of the heights and depths
of emotion I feel as a Negro" (16).

The themes of his poems focus on racial segregation.

2.3.4 Richard Wright (1908-1960)

African-American writer and poet Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908, in Roxie, Mississippi, Richard Wrights put emphasis on the black experience, violence, hostility and color .

He published *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four stories, and the book proved to be a significant turning point in his career. More acclaim followed in 1940 with the publication of the novel *Native Son*, which told the story of 20-year-old African-American male Bigger Thomas. The book brought Wright fame and freedom to write. It was a regular atop the bestseller lists and became the first book by an African-American writer to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, he continued to write novels, including *The Outsider* (1953) and *The Long Dream* (1958), and nonfiction, such as *Black Power* (1954) and *White Man, Listen!* (1957).

Many critics maintain that there is a similarity between Wright's naturalism and Dreiser's American tragedy since they see human nature as good. "It is society rather than the individual, which is really bad" (215). Furthermore, Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1945) represents a metaphor that blacks are invisible in the American society. It highlights the idea that both blacks and whites use lies for their own benefits (217).

Wright was regarded by many writers as an inspiration among them, there was Chester Himes who began writing in prison (Smith 853).

2.3.5 James Baldwin (1924-1987)

Writer and playwright James Baldwin was born August 2, 1924, in Harlem, New York. One of the 20th century's greatest writers, Baldwin broke new literary ground with the exploration of racial and social issues in his many works. He was especially well known for his essays on the black experience in America.

Baldwin had his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953. The loosely autobiographical tale focused on the life of a young man growing up in Harlem grappling with father issues and his religion.

Baldwin explored writing for the stage as well. He wrote *The Amen Corner*, which looked at the phenomenon of storefront Pentecostal religion. The play was produced at Howard University in 1955, and later on Broadway in the mid-1960s.

Baldwin maintains that non-violent ways can solve America's race problem. For instance, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) is a novel in which he gives a warning to the white society. Baldwin's works, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and *Just above My Head* (1979), do not have the high literary quality as his works of the sixties (218).

2.3.6 Amiri Baraka (1934)

Amiri Baraka formerly LeRoi Jones is an African-American poet, activist and scholar, he was an influential black nationalist. He was born in Newark, New Jersey, on October 7, 1934. After three years in the U.S. Air Force, Jones joined the Beat movement in Greenwich Village. After the assassination of Malcolm X, he took the name Amiri Baraka and became involved in the Black Nationalist poetry and literature scenes.

He has poems about love and others about pain. The pain of life made him hate the whites as in his poem , An Agony, he says:

In Inside someone
Who hates me, I took
Out from his eyes, small
What fouled tunes come in
To his breath (218).

Baraka is known for his aggressive, incendiary style. His writing is controversial and has often polarized readers. His poem "Somebody Blew up America," suggesting that Israel and American leaders knew of the 9/11 attacks before they happened, was condemned for being anti-Semitic. After the public outcry against the poem.

A prolific writer, Baraka has penned more than 50 books, including fiction, music criticism, essays, short stories, poetry and plays. In 1984, he published *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*. He's taught at many universities.

Baraka's prolific productions contain the jazz history Blues People (1963), the essays collected in Home (1966), the nationalist poetry collection Black Art (1966), the play The Toilet (1964) and The Slave published in 1964 (Koolish 10).

2.3.7 Maya Angelou (1928)

Born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou was a poet and award-winning author known for her acclaimed memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and her numerous poetry and essay collections.

The book won popularity and was nominated for the National Book Award. Her poetry book, *Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore IDiie* (1971) received a Pulitzer Prize nomination. In 1973, Angelou started to write for television. Moreover, she wrote articles, short stories, poetry and autobiographies (18).

The first black woman director in Hollywood, Angelou wrote, produced, directed, and starred in productions for stage, film, and television. Since publishing *Caged Bird*, Angelou continued to break new ground—not just artistically, but educationally and socially. She wrote the drama *Georgia, Georgia* in 1972—becoming the first African-American woman to have her screenplay produced—and went on to earn a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play *Look Away* (1973) and an Emmy Award nomination for her work on the television miniseries *Roots* (1977), among other honors.

Maya Angelou was both author and executive producer of a five-part television miniseries “Three Way Choice.” She also wrote and produced several prize-winning documentaries, including “Afro-Americans in the Arts,” a PBS special for which she received the Golden Eagle Award.

The hope for freedom represent one of the major themes that appear in Angelou’s work, she depicts hopes and compassion in her books. She also focuses on the theme of motherhood and the relationships among African American women (19).

2.3.8 Gwendolyn Brooks (1917)

Gwendolyn Brooks was a postwar poet best known as the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize, for her 1949 book *Annie Allen*, Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, on June 7, 1917.

She published her first poem in a children's magazine at age 13.. She began submitting her work to the *Chicago Defender*, a leading African-American newspaper. Her work included ballads, sonnets and free verse, drawing on musical rhythms and the content of inner-city Chicago.

Brooks published her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, in 1945. The book was an instant success, leading to a Guggenheim Fellowship and other honors. Her second book, *Annie Allen*, appeared in 1949. Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for *Annie Allen*, making her the first African American to win the coveted Pulitzer.

Contemporary African American writers began to redefine and change literature using models not only from European and American tradition, but also from their own distinctive oral forms. The poems, short stories and novels of the contemporary period represent creative writing

Brook's poems serve as a touchstone of African American history throughout the twentieth century; she witnessed some of the most important social and cultural changes in black people's life in the United States (Alexander & Rucker 172).

2.4 The Main Literary Genres

African American played an important part in American life, history, and culture. In the United States, the art and literature of the Negro people has had an economic origin. Much that is original in black American folklore, or singular in "Negro spirituals" and blues, can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the Negro's soul.

the main literary expression of the Negro was the slave narrative. One of the earliest of these narratives came from the pen of Gustavas Vassa, an African from Nigeria. This was a time of great pamphleteering in the United States. The free Africans in the North, and those who had escaped from slavery in the South, made their mark upon this time and awakened the conscience of the nation. Their lack of formal educational attainments gave their narratives a strong and rough-hewed truth, more arresting than scholarship.

In the first half of the twentieth century, African American writers were torn between masking and opening their expressions. Theaters were considered to be the only place to express reality and provide opportunities to focus on social problems. The theatrical possibilities of folk materials were explored (Graham & Ward 423).

Literature includes traditional genres such as prose, poetry and drama as well as films and music. The Black Arts movements gave rise to a set of journals like Negro

Digest, the Journal of Black Poetry and Third World Press. This movement effected cultural production in music, theater, art, dance and literature (Andrews et al. 471).

In addition, autobiography continues to flourish in the contemporary period. Autobiographical texts of the period include Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and Richard Wright's *American Hunger* (1977). Recently, African American autobiographers discovered their rights after the Civil Rights movement like Black Americans' education and integration in institutions of higher learning. Unfortunately, they continue to face various forms of racism (472).

African American writers produced popular literary genres; they have reached wide audiences. Thus, African American literature embodies important foundational works. In fact, horrors of slavery, segregation, and discrimination fostered the continuity of black literary imagination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2.5 The Themes of Contemporary African American Literature

African-American literature starts with narratives by slaves in the pre-revolutionary period focused on freedom and abolition of slavery. The period following the Civil War until 1919 is dubbed the Reconstruction period. Its themes were influenced by segregation, lynching, migration and the women's suffragette movement. The 1920s saw the Harlem Renaissance and the "flowering of Negro literature," as James Weldon Johnson called it. African-American literature since World War II has delved into modernist high art, black nationalism and postracial identities.

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The earliest African-American literature was focused on the "indelible stain" of slavery on American soil. The writers focused on themes of slavery, emphasizing the cruelty, indignity and the ultimate dehumanization of slaves. They were mostly written by slaves who had escaped into freedom. Classic slave narratives include the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" by Frederick Douglass and "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs. Slavery and slave narrative are

recurring themes in African-American literature adopted in the modern times by writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

Current literature focuses on the themes of African American culture, racism and equality, and the role of African Americans in society. The writings often reflect the current struggles of the African American race.

The era of literature from the 1970's to 1990's begins and concludes with a black feminist note. After 1986, Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, Jayne Cortez and Nikki Giovanni produced books of poetry reflecting black women's position. Alice Walker's second book of poems entitled *Revolutionary Petunias* (1972) has preceded these fame-making novels such as *The Color Purple* (1982). As a result, the term "womanism" was coined to describe a feminism concerning women of color.

This feminism was representative of the sexual, social and spiritual lives of black women (Booker 14). The era brought the publication of Ntozaka Shange's *Choreopoem* (1975), Michel Wallace's *Black Macho* and *The Myth of Superwomen* published in 1978 (Flora & Mackethan 18).

The works of these three African American women writers dominated this era and their writings exposed the new enemy. They discussed many topics that African American writers have often neglected such as domestic abuse. Their works form a bridge between black arts and feminist literature that has had an impact on the African American literature of the Contemporary period (Booker 14).

Today, African American writers continue to address many of the same societal concerns but are accepted outside of their community, as well These

2.5 Conclusion

Like the beginning of the African American movement, current literature focuses on the themes of African American culture, racism and equality, and the role of African Americans in society. The writings often reflect the current struggles of the African

American race. These writers pushed for an end of segregation, confronted the issue of racism and helped shape a sense of pride and independence in the African American community.

African American literature is widely known. By 1990, African American fiction became famous through Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). During this period, African American fiction had the chance to be read and appreciated.

General Conclusion

The early Afro-American literature dates back to the period when the US got its independence. Slave narratives are the beginning of Afro-American literature. The Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements played great roles in the development of African American writing. Today, African American literature is considered to be one of the basis in the literature of the United States.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, slave narratives appear as a form of protest literature. Many former slaves, including Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass wrote slave narratives about their personal lives.

When the American Civil War put an end to slavery in the US, some Black writers started producing nonfiction works about the situation of African-Americans after slavery. The post-slavery era introduced several great writers to Afro-American literature. As W.E.B. DuBois African American writings during the twentieth century dealt with the era of slavery to understand the present.

For more than a century southern blacks wrote numerous prose narratives, which in their variety conformed to the autobiographical mode. There have been the fugitive-slave narratives and the ex-slave narratives; the spiritual, social, political, and personal autobiographies; the confessionals, exemplary lives, the diary-type and journal-type autobiographies; as well as the autobiographical novel. At times, real-life experiences and incidents were the backdrop for fictional characters; at other times real-life characters become the nucleus around which fictional experiences and incidents are presented.

The purpose of the current study has been to shed the light on the development of the African American literature throughout time. Also, it maintain that African Americans deserve equal rights as the white.

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