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***The Development of African American Literature from
The Seventeenth Till The Nineteenth Century***

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of the requirements for the Master's degree in English Literary and
Cultural Studies.*

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Dedication

*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 beloved grandmother.

To all my family members.

Acknowledgment

I owe my loving thanks to my parents for their love and support throughout my life.

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Abstract

African Americans suffered from slavery for many years. They were mistreated and tortured, forced to do hard tasks, and deprived from their basic rights. Although these people were victims of the white race supremacy, they didn't have the ability to defend their rights. Due to these reasons, they resorted to Literature as a means of self expression. Escaped slaves from the South began writing about their life experiences under the bondage of slavery. They aimed to portray the atrocity of this nonhuman practice and its negative impact on the blacks and the American society. In fact, literature was a way of gaining freedom. Consequently, many notable writers appeared on the literary scene and whose influence played an important role in the abolishment of slavery. The Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements contributed greatly in the development of African American literature. Over the course of time, African American literature became an essential part of American literature and culture. This study is an attempt to provide the reader with an overview on how African American literature developed throughout time.

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List of Abbreviations

NAACP: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

CORE: Congress of Racial Equality

NCNW: The National Council of Negro Women

UNIA: The Universal Negro Improvement Association

General introduction

General introduction:

African American literature has become a cornerstone of American literature and culture. It has contributed massively in helping the American community to overcome many racial problems. African American literature has investigated the problem of racism in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects.

African American literature with its entire socio-literary abundance caused a metamorphosis in the literary and cultural structure of the American society. There are many historical events that have contributed in the emergence of African American literature. This research paper aims to give the reader an overview of the most important historical stations of the evolution of African American literature from the 17th century until the 19th century with a focus on the prominent changes that had occurred. On the basis of these considerations a research question has to be raised:

What are the reasons behind the development of African American literature?

- In order to answer the aforementioned question, the following research hypothesis has to be formulated:
- It is believed that racism and inequality play an important role in the development of African American literature.

For this purpose, the present research paper is split into two chapters. The first chapter sheds the light on the historical background of African American literature and also tackles the main African American movements from the colonial to the contemporary period. Then, the second chapter introduces some 20th century famous black writers and their achievements.

Chapter One:

African American Literature

1.1 Introduction:

African slavery has always been a debatable topic in America, socially and historically. According to Jack Kelly, Many Americans feel guilty because their ancestors participated in African slave trade. Many Africans were sold as slaves to America to work in the plantations.

They were completely deprived from their basic rights, they received bad treatment from their owners, and they were prohibited from education. These reasons pushed many African Americans to gain access to the world of literature; many of them became poets and writers to express to the world the torture and suffering they were subjected to. Their journey dates from the colonial period till the contemporary time. These black writers sought to get freedom and social justice.

1.2 The Historical Background (17th century – 20th centuries)

African American literature has become a cornerstone for American literature. It has also paved the way for other streams of literature to be part of American literature such as Native American, Chicano American, Asian American streams of literature. There are many reasons for the emergence of African American literature among which is the problem of race and color. These last mentioned pushed many African American writers to rely on writing to establish social equality and gain a decent place for themselves in the American community. The issue of segregation was purely an English production. They had developed the notion of the distinction between the superior race referring to Europeans and the inferior other referring to Africans. This notion was built upon preconceptions rooted in images of blackness and physical differences between the two peoples (Bruce 02). Those false images were the work of English adventurers and traders who had visited Africa. The literature read at that time misrepresented the African continent and its people. Africans were described a primitive, savage, and ugly people (01).

Early in the 18th century, the blacks did not have the right to make testimony in the court especially in the South. Many colonies forced the free blacks to pay taxes and were deprived from owning a property. They have even lost the right to keep their wives; as a result, their wives were given to others (64). In Virginia, blacks were not allowed to vote. They were also given names like 'Negros' 'Blacks' 'Colored' and 'African Americans'. In fact, these issues were manifested in many African American novels, poems, and plays. These works were an identical reflection of the harsh experiences that African Americans had endured (Warren 05). African American literature went through many literary periods: The colonial period (1746 – 1800), the antebellum period (1865 – 1900), the protest period (1960 – 1969), and the contemporary period (1970 – present).

1.2.1 The Colonial Period (1746 – 1800)

The United States received massive waves of African emigrants during the colonial period. These thousands of people left their homelands and travelled to America seeking a better life. This event changed the history of an entire continent. Wheatley, one of the captured slaves who were transported to colonial America, focused in her writing on the difference between life under slavery and life of freedom (Jarrett 22).

Many African American writings of the colonial period were means of breaking the constraints of slavery; therefore, these writings were not accepted as authentic such as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass works. Many slaves worked in plantation. However, in New England some slaves worked for families. Over the course of time, there had been an interaction between these families and their slaves who shared with them stories about their lives before slavery in Africa. This latter raised the whites' awareness about the atrocity of slavery (Dickson 20).

The constant conflict between slavery and African American writings made the issue of slavery more visible to the outside world because it unmasked the rapacious goals behind the non human activity which has initially claimed to civilize and educate

Africans. Moreover, African American writings unveiled the miserable life conditions of African slaves.

1.2.2 The Antebellum Period (1800 – 1865)

During the Antebellum period black literature was a tool to abolish slavery. Many black slaves focused on the narration of their life stories to show the injustice of slavery such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and William Well Brown. Alongside slave narration, other western abolitionist writers stood against slavery and called for the freedom of African slaves through their novels and poems. Many anti-slavery newspapers such as *The Liberator* opened their doors for African slaves to recount their life stories under the bondage of slavery and make it public. Lydia Maria Child and William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*, helped Harriet Jacobs to edit her book *Incident in the Life of Slave Girl* (Jones 37). Her work was later published in 1861.

The Antebellum period in American history ranges from the period before the Civil War and after the war of 1812. Many important events and crucial changes took place during this period. For instance, the rise of public awareness about the true identity of slavery led many people to reconsider their opinions about it, while many others joined the anti-slavery side. Over the course of time, this situation reached another level and the country was divided into abolitionists and supporters of slavery.

This period was also characterized by an ever growing revolt of black slaves against their white masters all over America. However, many attempts failed and rebellious leaders were executed like Gabriel Prosser (1800) and Nat Turner (1831). Ever since, slaves were considered 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 offered an

opportunity for feminist writers to participate in the fight against slavery alongside black men writers (Jacobs 98).

Furthermore, African American literature of this period was constituted of a blend between African oral traditions and written work which manifested slaves' yearning for freedom (Smith & Jones 39). In 1833 William Lloyd Garrison and Arthur Tappan established the American Anti-slavery Society (AASS) with the help of freed black writers like Frederick Douglass. By 1840 AASS reached a large number of abolitionists estimated between 150.000 to 200.000 members. Eventually, AASS obtained more traction and support to become an extended movement that had publically criticized slavery and called for social reform (Encyclopaedia Britannica). The Antebellum period had a deep impact on the course of American history, including South secession from North and Civil War outbreak, the abolition of slavery, and the growth of Feminist and Temperance movement.

1.2.3 The Reconstruction period (1865 – 1900)

The reconstruction period was characterized by an emphasis on giving black slaves more social, economic, and political freedom. However, the fact that the majority of black slaves were illiterate represented a great obstacle. Therefore, many schools were founded to promote education and literacy among blacks, and thus enable them to write and read (Worth 05).

Many African Americans employed their voices and their writings to advocate black's political rights. African American oral tradition incarnated in speeches, sermons, stories, and spiritual songs were also put into function to spread and reinforce equality (155). William Wells Brown, famous fugitive slave narrator, wrote the first black American novel, *Clotel; or, The president's Daughter* (1853). The tragic story talks about Thomas Jefferson's beautiful African American light skinned daughter and her mother Clotel, a slave mistress. Clotel dies trying to save her daughter from slavery.

During this period, African American writers sought to introduce African oral and written traditions through the integration of black dialects in their literature. They merged vernacular expressions with English to captivate the attention of their readers. For example, Paul Laurence Dunbar describing African American struggle for dignity and equality in his poem *Sympathy* (1899), he 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)

In *Sympathy*, the caged bird symbolizes the suppression of all African Americans and their lack of freedom including him. The reconstruction era was a period of freedom for African slaves. They were allowed to vote, acquire lands of former owners, and receiving education. However, these rights were violated as the reconstruction period ended. With the emergence of the Jim Crow Laws in the 19th century, African Americans faced racial segregation and marginalization. It served for the purpose of maintaining white supremacy over all African Americans (Haggard xvii). Besides, any black community or individuals trying to oppose Jim Crow Laws often face violence and death.

1.2.4 Harlem Renaissance (1900 – 1940)

The Harlem Renaissance also known as the New Negro movement is an intellectual, social, and artistic movement that took place in Harlem, New York City. The period of Harlem renaissance is believed to be the zenith of African American literature flourishing. “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).

The origins of the Harlem Renaissance lie in the Great Migration¹ of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North that offered better life opportunities. The American society witnessed an increasing demand for human rights during this period. The period of the Harlem Renaissance coincided with the First World War. African Americans saw in the war a great opportunity to prove their loyalty, thus, gain equality and respect within American society. Over one million African Americans complied with the call of duty, men and women. African Americans believed that making sacrifices for the sake of the country would make the government reward them with greater civil rights (Bryan). After the war ended, these African Americans demanded their civil rights. The leaders of the Harlem Renaissance were young artists and writers of the new generation. They wanted to show evidence of their potential and were proud of their black race belonging. They strived to avoid any kind of implication in political issue (Smith & Jones 163).

Alain Locke featured in his anthology *New Negro* (1925) several significant achievements of the most talented writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Poets like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen. Novelists like Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer (Hutchinson). Locke explains that the difference between the New Negro generation of writers and the old one lies in self-confidence. The New generation shows more confidence and assertiveness, audacity to question conventional “white” aesthetic standards, self-expression and racial pride. Moreover, these writers were supported by many American leading magazines such as: *The Crisis*, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)²; *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League³. Alongside

¹ **The Great Migration** was the movement of six million African-Americans out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West that occurred between 1916 and 1970.

²**The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** is a civil rights organization in the United States, formed in 1909 to advance justice for African Americans.

³ **The National Urban League** is a nonpartisan civil rights organization based in New York City that advocates on behalf of African Americans and against racial discrimination in the United States.

magazines were also journals like *The Messenger*, a socialist journal. And newspapers like *Negro World*, the newspaper of Marcus Garvey (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). Famous literary achievements of the Harlem Renaissance are: McKay's sonnets "If We Must Die" (1919) and "Outcast" (1922), Hurston's "Mules and Man" (1925), Langston Hughes's jazz and blues poetry "The Weary Blues" (1926) and "Fine Clothes to the Jew" (1927).

Although narrative prose and poetry were the most memorable and dominant forms of literature of the Harlem Renaissance, drama had also its own status and contributions. *The Chip Women's Fortune* written by Willis Richardson in 1923 was the first nonmusical play by an African American to be produced in Broadway, New York. Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1935) was also a great success of black drama and won wide acclaim on Broadway. In 1930 the Black Community Theatre appeared, it revealed talented actors such as Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. Black theatre grew more progressively and militant, reflecting black struggle for freedom and equality (*ibid*). Black theatre provided significant visibility for New Negro playwrights. The era of the Harlem Renaissance represents a dramatic change in the history of African American literature, one that molded the course of the black experience in 20th century.

1.2.5 The Protest Period (1940 – 1959)

Although slavery was officially abolished after the Civil War, African Americans continued to suffer from racial discrimination and segregation. By the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of the Second World War, black Americans were completely agitated from the way they were handled within society. Thus, they commenced massive protests in order to gain equality and respect. This period was known by the protest era. These protests were aimed at obtaining freedom (Smith & Jones 468).

African American writers faced many difficulties in their career because of the economic issue of this period. They hardly obtained funds for their works. 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" (469). Black

writers expressed their struggle for acceptance in society through poems, novels, plays, short stories and essays.

Poets like Gwendolyn Brooks (winner of Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her poem *Annie Allen* (1949), Langston Hughes, Margaret Danner, Melvin B. Tolson, Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown, Margaret Walker, and Mary Elizabeth Vorman. Margaret Walker's poem *For My People* (1942) talks about pride in African American culture and reveals the ugly truth about slavery, servitude, and discrimination. Her poem represents the new era for black women poets who stopped publishing poetry since 1918 (470).

In addition to poets, novelists and playwrights were also very active. As an example, Ralph Ellison and his famous novel *Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin and his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Paule Marshall and her first novel *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959), Lorraine Hansberry, Mari Evans, William Melvin Kelly, and Ernest Gaines. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the first play by an African American woman to reach Broadway, addresses segregated housing policies. Hansberry won the New York Critics Circle Award in 1959 for her play. According to Brandon Colas:

The setting of *A Raisin in the Sun* is the ghetto of Chicago, where most blacks lived. These districts consisted of overpriced, overcrowded, and poorly-maintained apartments and homes. In the ghettos, crime rates were high and public services were limited. Most blacks living in the ghetto had hopes of leaving to better suburban neighborhoods, but segregated housing kept them stuck in the ghetto (01).

In 1942, Congress of racial equality (CORE)⁴ was founded by James Farmer. The aim of this organization was to ameliorate race relations and combat racial prejudice. CORE played a major role in defending black people against discrimination and

⁴ The Congress of Racial Equality is an African-American civil rights organization founded in 1942. Its mission is to bring about equality for all people regardless of race, sex, religion or ethnic background.

segregation practices at the time. Moreover, in 1935 Mary McLeod Bethune established the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) to help black women overcome their concerns. These organizations demanded social, economic, and political equality. They also asked for equating black Americans patriotism with war work as appropriate for full citizens (Beaulieu 262).

1.2.6 The Contemporary Period (1960 – present)

The period extending from 1960 to 1969 is known for its different yet interrelated movements including the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Art Movement or Black Aesthetics Movement, the Black Nationalist Movement, and the Women's Movement or simply Feminism.

The Civil Right Movement was a massive protest movement against segregation and discrimination of blacks in the South. Rosa Parks' refusal to leave her bus seat for the white man in Alabama, in 1955, fueled a series of zealous reactions that signaled the birth of this movement (R. Peck & Howard 01). The adherents of the movement were inspired by the charismatic leader Martin Luther King and adopted many of his philosophies.

The Civil Rights Movement racked up many notable victories, from the dismantling of segregation in the South, to securing the passage of federal legislation prohibiting racial discrimination, to the widespread awareness of the beauty and uniqueness of the African American culture and its contributions to the history of the US (Getchell).

Black Power Movement grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. Many black people became exhausted with the pacifist methods of the Civil Rights Movement which was in their opinion not very effective to improve race relations at the time. For many, Black Power Movement seemed more promising because it corresponded to their needs; it was an action directed movement. Black Power Movement focused on education. They wanted education that gives a true representation of their history and their contributions in the American society. Garter G. Woodson explains in his book

The Mis-Education of the Negro how he was culturally indoctrinated, rather than taught, in American schools (Wikipedia). Besides education, black protesters wanted economic equality, not just desegregation, and they wanted an end to police brutality. Unlike Civil Rights Protesters, black Power activists fought back when they were attacked by police.

The Black Arts Movement (Black Aesthetics Movement) is the artistic outgrowth of the Black Power Movement. This movement appeared in the 1960s and early 1970s and was characterized by the development of art and literature. Black Arts Movement adopted the cultural politics of Black Nationalism as their theories which were referred to as Black Aesthetics. The movement aimed to produce a populist art form to promote the idea of black separatism. The literature of the movement was distinguished for using Black English vernacular and confrontational tone. It addressed many issues such as interracial tension, sociopolitical awareness, and the significance of African history and culture to African Americans in the US (Encyclopædia Britannica).

The Black Arts writers' literature was a means of exhortation, and poetry was the most efficacious method to foster Black consciousness. The Black Arts Movement was mainly concerned with the creation of a "black" identity as opposed to a "Negro" identity, which the adherents sought to escape. Important figures of the movement were Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Etheridge Knight, Carolyn M. Rodgers, and Nikki Giovanni (ibid).

Le Roi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka ("blessed prince" in Bantu), coined the term Black Art when he established his Black Art Repertory Theatre in Harlem (1965). Baraka also criticized poems that do not adequately represent the black struggle, which is clearly seen in his famous poem *Black Art* (1969). Haki R. Madhubuti, known as Don L. Lee until 1973, was entitled the movement's most popular writer with his publications of *Think Black* (1967) and *Black Pride* (1968).

Among the leading Black Arts playwrights was the three times Obie Awards winner Ed Bullins. In his plays *Clara's Ole Man* (1965) and *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1971), Ed Bullins focused on the gritty existence of urban African Americans.

Regarding fiction, this form of literature was not very popular like poetry and drama because greater resources were needed to make publications. Nevertheless, many authors were successful in their career. For example, Ernest J. Gaines demonstrated a mastery of the short story in his *Bloodline* (1968). Gaines also wrote *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), one of the renowned female characters in African American fiction who testifies black people's audacious achievements from bondage to the Civil Rights era. Margaret Walker published her novel *Jubilee* (1966), an attempt to liberate black American women from the stereotyped image of the "Mammy" that was bound to them. James Alan McPherson equally celebrated his collection *Hue and Cry* (1968) (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Black Nationalist Movement emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. The movement focused on the social, political, and economic empowerment of the blacks and to promote a sense of community and group feeling. Leaders of the movement understood that African American people in America were a "nation within a nation" and should establish a distinct black identity. Black nationalists opposed assimilation into white American culture. With such slogans as "black power" and "black is beautiful," they intended to create a sense of pride among blacks. Among African American writers known for their strong nationalism was W.E.B Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, who encouraged the development of black literature and art and urged his readers to see "beauty in black" (ibid).

Women's Movement is a diverse social movement addressing economic, social, and cultural inequalities. It is also recognized as the "second wave" of the larger Feminist Movement. Jennie L. Mouton, leader of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), claims that "for 43 years the organization that grew out of this call has been working for the uplift of the race generally and for the advancement of the race in particular"; she adds:

Although, there had been conflict among African American women at the political level over the strategies of resistance, black women's organization carried out. It contains solidarity on wide range of issues

across class, color, poor and working class. Black American women joined white American women for the sake of ending discrimination (Collier & Franklin 23).

The most visible of this newer movement is the rise of black feminist literature. many women writers emerged such as Toni Morrison (Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winner), Alice Walker (Pulitzer Prize winner), Paule Marshall (MacArthur Prize winner), Octavia E. Butler (MacArthur Prize winner), Rita Dove (Pulitzer Prize winner), Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and a host of others with their keen methods in demonstrating the correlation between race, gender, and class in a range of literary forms.

From the 1970s till the present time, many changes occurred in the American society. Black literature became an essential part of university curriculum (Joseph 743). African American women's demands for equality gained more ground and their voices started to be heard after the Civil Rights Movement. Another form of art where African Americans could express themselves was music, especially Rap music. It tackled real life matters like violence, drug abuse and teenage (744). Eminent writers of the 1980s 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 began with the emergence of slavery in America. Earlier in the 19th century, it was only simple accounts by people who escaped from the bondage of slavery about their adventure to freedom (Wikipedia). However, because of the many changes and events that had occurred in the American society, African American literature developed to become later an essential part in American literature and culture.

African American literature with its different forms, novels, short stories, poems, and playwrights, sought to make an end to the issue of slavery, racial segregation and discrimination, and eventually gain equality for black people. African American

literature went through many literary phases including Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism.

1.3.1 African American Literary Realism (1865 – 1914)

Realism is broadly defined as “the faithful representation of reality”. Realist artists strove to depict the beauty and ugliness of human motive, actions, and relations with as much precision and less overstatement as possible (N. Williams 188). Unlike literature of the Genteel Tradition that favored “artifice” over “real”, realist writers preferred to describe life as it is, in simple terms and real manner. In the perspective of William Dean Howells, the (Dean of American Letters) who eagerly promoted literary realism in the United States, the technique was “nothing more and nothing less than truthful treatment of material” (ibid). According to some scholars, the origins of realism go back to a period long before the Civil War, much earlier than the era of postbellum high realism. In her perspective about realism, Augusta Rohrbach believes that African American slave narratives gave techniques and strategies that may have molded later realist literary approaches (187).

During the period of the Harlem Renaissance, many African American writers employed literary realism in their writings as a tool to combat racial problems, but at the same time there were other who used this literary device to depict African American everyday life struggle (Francis 01).

Black writers abandoned American realism and focused on romance in their writings between the Civil War and First World War because their efforts in that domain have not been rewarded with sufficient publications opportunities, enough sales, or audiences interested in depictions of African American’ realities (N. Williams 185). Market demands and social conditions largely influenced how authors, white and black, portray African American life. Thus, both truth and realism were predominantly a matter of perspective and preference. The novelist Chesnutt claims that “there have been few realist fiction of African American life” (186). In order to clarify this situation much better, Chesnutt uses his own career as an example. At the peak of his publishing in the 1890s, he succeeded to gain popularity in the Atlantic Monthly when

he intelligently employed realism in entertaining short stories. However, as he tried to use realism to deliver more overt political messages exposing bitter race relations in the segregated South, like his novel *Marrow of Tradition* (1901), he lost favor with white audiences. “White audiences largely were uninterested in literature that challenged racial status quo” (N. Williams 185).

Realism was not merely a matter of mimetic reflection of social reality, but also to construct it. Realistic writers’ literature intended to provide social interpretations that would, at least indirectly, mend and improve racial relations by encouraging people to sincerely deal with one another, while neglecting any sentiments of prejudice or pretensions to idealism (188).

1.3.2 African American Naturalism

Naturalism is a literary genre that started as a movement in the late nineteenth century in literature. Naturalism emphasizes observation and the scientific method in the fictional portrayal of reality. It is a type of extreme realism. Naturalistic writers built their writings upon the belief that human environment shapes and governs its character. “It meant that human behavior is solely under the control of heredity and social environment” (Hakutani 02).

Unlike romantic writing that pictures the ideal, naturalist fiction regards the ideal as false, impossible or radically perverted. Naturalist literature portrays how individuals’ freedom is hindered by biological and environmental limitations and restrictions. Indeed, the best example of the deprivation of individuals’ freedom is slavery and the constant association between slaves and inferiority (258).

Many black writers adopted the naturalist literary approach in their works, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. These writers had their own vision on how to claim back the rights of their people that whites have blatantly violated. They sought to free their followers from rules imposed on them without promoting any sense of rebellion, anger, or protest. For example, *Back Boy*, written by Wright has an undeniable impact on African American literary criticism (02).

However, some black writers like Ellison started to feel burdened by this literary style as it was not convenient to describe the reality of African American life. In this context, Donald Pizer claims 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 the order” (201).

1.3.3 African American Modernism

African American Modernism as a literary movement emerged in Europe and America in the 19th and early 20th century. The movement is characterized by a sudden break with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Modernist literature came into existence due to a series of cultural shocks. The horror of both World Wars, especially World War One, made many people question the fate of humanity. Writers reacted to this situation by turning toward modernist sentiments. In contrast to the romantic world view that emphasizes nature and being, the modernist speaks of the inner self and consciousness. Instead of progress and growth, the modernist sees decay and collapse of civilization. Instead of new technology, the modernist sees merciless machinery and growing capitalism, which alienated the individual and led to loneliness (The Literature Network). As to modernism in black literature, it was set in motion when a minority of African Americans lived among the whites in the cities; they dwelled small segregated areas known as ghettos (Jacques 01).

Beginning in the 1942, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tracked every activity of black writers and every twist of their literary and romantic lives. Black literature was viewed as a threat for national security; therefore, “FBI acted as a concealed censor and border guard, distorting or deferring publications and forcing or sidetracking international travels” (J. Maxwell 255). FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, agitated by Wright’s *photo-history 12 Million Black Voices* (1941), ordered the Bureau’s New York field office to review his collected works for sign of sedition (US, Wright file, December 8, 1942). Wright responded to Hoover’s compulsion with a satirical poem “*The FB eye Blues*,” in which he criticizes the Bureau for spying on him

(J. Maxwell 255). He says:

That old FB eye

Tied a bell to my bed stall

Said old FB eye

Tied a bell to my bed stall

Wake up this morning

FB eye under my bed

Said I woke up this morning

FB eye under my bed

Told me all I dreamed last night, every word I said (Wright 01)

Federal Bureau of Investigation, the best-publicized agent and symbol of the US national security, shaped the leading edge of 20th century black American literary writing (J. Maxwell 256). Moreover, black modern literature involved topic like “double-consciousness”. For instance, W.E.B Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

Recently, modernism has been shaped by African American contributions primarily in the field of music with ragtime, blues, and jazz (Jacques preface). The connection between music, jazz in particular, and literature mirrored the hope of African Americans for finding a new life (Karl 15).

1.3.4 The Neorealism Movement (1970 – present)

The Neorealism movement is associated with European realism that was founded in the 19th century. It focuses on the portrayal of life as it is truly lived without and idealization. It elucidates the material nature of life identically. African American literature commenced to project blacks’ life more realistically.

The dominating genres of this period were slave narratives and autobiographies, most black writings of this period emphasized African American social life and the pressure they experienced (Dickson – Carr 177). Writing functioned as an essential composition of a truthful embodiment of black life within a racial country. African American Neorealism also gives explanations of the significance of these African American life reflections on the American community as whole.

African American literature of this period was characterized by its diversity of genres. The most famous black women writers of the 20th century are Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor (745). African American neorealists advocate the idea that blacks are social beings who must not be ripped out of their social and historical context which develops their potential and highlights their significance as individuals and gives them more hope (Dickson – Carr 177).

1.4 Conclusion

Liberty, justice, and equal opportunity were the characteristics of the American white life. However, these norms did not apply to African Americans; instead, they were subjected to deprivation, segregation, and racial discrimination. Therefore, the black liberation movement emerged. Black Americans described their struggle with slavery and racism through literature. It functioned as a channel to transmit their life experiences within a white dominant society. This type of literature has been given various names like Negro literature, Black Literature, Colored literature, and African American literature. Regardless of how many names it has been given, this latter witnessed many changes from the period of slavery till the present time.

Black writers demonstrated African American hope for a more egalitarian and respectful future through their poems, novels, playwrights, and short stories and essays. Accordingly, African Americans restored their freedom and dignity. They also managed to preserve their own identity within the American society. Nevertheless, the struggle is still ongoing until nowadays. The next chapter will deal with 20th century literature.

Chapter Two:
Contemporary African American
Authors

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General Conclusion

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the most important historical events that contributed in the shaping and development of contemporary African American literature. This chapter also introduces some pioneering African American writers of the era as well as some of their famous works. Additionally, it presents the main themes in contemporary African American literature.

2.2 Historical Background of Contemporary African American literature

African American literature has attempted to unveil the ugly truth about being a slave. Conditions of slavery produced a certain genre of writing known as slave narratives. Although, these works had not been well received by the whites for it revealed uncomfortable truth, it did, however, stir anti-slavery sentiments which by turn led to later slavery abolishment.

Over the course of time, the number of black authors grew remarkably and their writings became more legitimized in the United States, African American women could finally write and made an overwhelming success in the literary field, and African American studies departments were established in many universities around the country (A. Brooks & Jealous 134).

African-American literature progressively developed from Phillis Wheatley, the first African American poet to publish her works, to Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Walter Mosley, Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor, the contemporary best Black writers (Dr. Ambreen 108).

Phillis Wheatley, sold as a slave child in America, and her works gave momentum to the beginning of African American literature. There were also other African American early writers who helped the black writing take a step forward. Among these writers was Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, who became one of the prominent leaders of the abolitionist movement (Shodahganga).

The issue of slavery and breaking free from captivity has been a dominant theme during the period of slavery. Slave narratives are the beginning of African American literature. With the help of new printing technologies which facilitated writing and made it inexpensive, African slaves were able to write their memories and experiences with slavery for the first time. Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) is said to be the first African American writer who wrote an autobiography. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, gives an accurate and horrendous account of his enslavement in the West Indies. He gives some details of Niger, his native land in Africa. Equiano's efforts to end slavery are undeniable. Equiano was a skilful writer of narratives that changed the opinion of white people about Africa. Vincent Carretta writes of Equiano's representation of Africa:

All that we know of Olaudah Equiano's existence in Africa Comes from his own account, and that account was clearly intended to be part of the dialogue about the African slave trade. His representation of Igboland challenged the images of Africa as a land of savagery, idolatry, cannibalism, indolence, and social disorder. Proponents of the slave trade argued that enslavement by Europeans saved Africans from such evils and introduced them to civilization, culture, industry, and Christianity (Equiano 5).

"*Bars Fight*" is the oldest poem of African American literature written by Lucy Terry. It speaks about the murdering of two White families by Native Americans (Gerzina 3). Being a black woman, her inspiration upon the assassination of those White families by native Indians was considered as one of the rare cases in American Literature. Harriet Jacobs's biography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is also another famous work written by a Black woman for it covers every aspect of slavery.

Many black writers reacted towards depriving the Black community from their economic and social rights. Some of the finest masterpieces of African American literature were produced by the direct influences of the slave narratives "Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and such

prize-winning contemporary novels as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, bear the direct influence of the slave narrative” (Andrews).

Phillies Wheatley, Fredrick Douglass, and Jupiter Hammon were also prominent and distinguished in the sub-genre of slave narratives and important figures in the early history of African American poetry. Jupiter Hammon was Lloyed’s family slave for four generations. His preoccupation to end slavery reverberates through most of his works. Although he convinced the new generation to begin emancipation and to end slavery, he always called for the gradual improvement of slaves (Shodahganga).

In the field of fiction, William Wells Brown, and Victor Séjour were the pioneers of African American literature by writing the earliest fictions of Black literature. Victor Séjour’s influence on African American fiction has been little. William Wells Brown, on the other hand, showed his dexterity of writing; he inspired many new black writers to write their own narratives. Among his famous works is *Narrative of William Brown, a fugitive Slave Written by Himself*.

As the Civil War put an end to slavery in the US, some Black authors began writing nonfiction works about post-slavery situation of African-Americans such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. Changing the consciousness of African Americans in their struggle for freedom was the ultimate objective behind writing this book. The most significant theme is the double consciousness with which African Americans discuss their identities as blacks and as individuals.

Booker T. Washington founded a Black College, the Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama. He was an educator and believed in cultivating Black people before putting an end to slavery. He was encouraging his students to focus on their economic improvement and accomplishment, while putting aside political activism. Booker T. Washington wrote numerous books. Among his famous works are: *Up from slavery* (1901), *The future of the American Negro* (1899), *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905) and *My Larger Education* (1911). Washington died on November 14, 1915; however, his

institute continued to be flourishing. Marcus Garvey was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey urged black people to take control of their destiny: "There shall be no solution to this race problem until you yourselves strike the blow for liberty" (King).

The publication of the post-slavery era writers gave structure to the new-born African American literature in the US. Although black men writers' contribution to Black movement of writing in post-slavery era was huge, African American women played an important role in the continuity of the movement, they took it more seriously. Consequently, numerous famous African American women writers emerged. For instance, Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, Alice Walker and many others. Black women writers succeeded to achieve fame in American literature and won the universal appraisal and judgment of critics for their significant works. Barbara Christian says in her book *Black Women Novelists*:

Fifteen years ago we would not be able to call the list of African American women writers that have been published in the last decade: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, June Jordan, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Joyce Carol Thomas, Toni Cade Bambara, etc (Christian, 18).

In recent years, most of the novels written by Black women writers revolve around the theme of the individual and collective identity as well as the mutual influences of sexism and racism. African American women have always suffered the double oppression of sex and race. "The argument that African American women confront both a woman question and a race problem captures the essence of black feminist thought" (Guy-Sheftall 1). Among these contemporary writers are Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall. The situation of African women became worse after the abolishment of slave trade. The importation of slaves stopped and business slave holders relied on reproduction to make profit. Black women were force to have as many children as possible. Forced to bear children at a younger age and without proper medical care combined with physical punishment and hard work intensified the

oppression for black women. The ill-treatment of African women resulted in dehumanizing them and taking away the Black women individuality. The Black women of the US could not rely on Black men for protection against the racist Whites because the Western hegemony had also made their male partners as powerless as women. For this reason, they had to depend on themselves to resist the ruthlessness of the Whites. Their resistance took many forms The Black women's resistance appeared in many different ways, from rebellion against masters, to establishing a collective web of consciousness for resisting the White hegemony in an effective way. Their resistance focused on "creating a sense of community, preserving and transmitting to their children African based cultural practices and beliefs as revealed in music making, quilting, storytelling, naming of children and sustaining traditional marriage practices. Even as slaves, African women attempted to shape the peculiar institutions in ways that allowed them preserve their dignity." (Hine 12). The failure of organizations and movements to change the situation of black women such as the Civil Right Movement was one of the major reasons that led Black women of the US to form the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO)⁵ in New York.

Black feminism, from its appearance in 1970's to the modern era, aims to empower black women against the racist, sexist, and classist oppression. Empowering African American women to build their self-confident was not only mentally but also materialistically. During these years, many economic and cultural associations were established by African American women activists in order to sustain and improve the materialistic situation of Black women in the US.

Since the 1980s, Black women writers occupied the first place for the number of publications in the US—in quality as well as quantity of work. Walker, Jones, Morrison, McMillan, and Naylor are among the leading writers. Other prominent women writers, mainly concerned with fiction, include Gwendolyn Parker, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Marita Golden, Lucinda Roy, Bernice McFadden, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Chase-Riboud Helen Lee, Dawn Turner Trice, Yolanda Joe,

⁵ The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) addresses the unique issues affecting black women in America.

Pearl Cleage, and Helen Lee, and Diane McKinney-Whetstone.

African American male writers are outnumbered by black women writers. Among the current African American male novelists are Ishmael Reed, Walter Mosley, John Edgar Wideman, E. Lynn Harris, Colson Whitehead, Darryl Pinckney, Brian Keith Jackson, Trey Ellis, Brent Wade, Ernest Gaines, Albert French, and Clarence Major. African American novelists often confront issues of identity, offering interpretations of womanhood and manhood. The old generation of black writers differentiates from the new generation remarkably. As the issue of slavery and racial segregation became less important, contemporary writers shifted their focus toward new subjects like improving their writing skills and expressing their pride of being black. The contemporary period is supposed to be the golden age of African American literature (Andrews et al. 14).

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). Contemporary African American literature has taken a different path; contemporary African American writers examine subjects from different angles to express criticism, produce a debate, and find effective solutions. In this context, Shockley says:

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)

2.3 Contemporary African American Writers

Many different yet important movements shaped the development of African American literature including the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements. Many famous writers appeared such as W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Cullen, Wright, Ellison, Baldwin and Amiri Baraka. They portrayed the blacks' situation and criticized the white oppressor in their works. They also called for justice and social equality.

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

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois or W.E.B. Du Bois was an American sociologist and civil rights activist. He was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He identified himself as a “mulatto” because he was of a mixed race. He grew up in an indulgent environment and studied with white children and received considerable encouragement and support from white teachers. In 1888, he graduated from Fisk University, a historically black institution in Nashville, Tennessee. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895, and his doctoral dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America (1638–1870)*, was published in 1896. He became a professor of history and economics at the Atlanta University in Georgia in 1897 (Rudwick).

Du Bois believed that social change could be accomplished only through agitation and protest, and he strongly protested against lynching, and discrimination in education and employment. He defended people of color, especially Africans and Asians. He clashed with Booker T. Washington who was the director of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The two men perceived civil rights activism differently. Du Bois opposed T. Washington who urged blacks to not resist discrimination for the time being and work hard to uplift themselves and make economic gain, thus winning the respect of whites. In 1903, he published *The Souls of Black Folk*. This book is a work of sociology rather than fiction. The book contains various essays on race; many of them reflect Du Bois' own experiences as black in the American society. The book

also examines black individuals' consciousness who strived to become both Negroes and Americans (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 (Oakes 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 claimed 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 among the prominent leaders of Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes was an American poet, novelist, and playwright. He was interested in the jazz and blues of black music. As a child, Langston was interested in listening to the stories of slavery, most of which was his grandmother's tales of his ancestors. He grew up proud of his black identity and tradition; therefore, he decided to devote his life for the benefit of his black race. *The Negro Speak of Rivers* (1921) is one of his famous poems which tackle the topic of slave trade; it is about slaves who were sold down the river of the Mississippi. He says in this poem:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young
I built my hut near the Congo and it bulled me to sleep
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers (12).

He protested against whites' ill-treatment of blacks and warned of an explosion of black violence. He says about this situation:

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? (Leach 214)

Although Langston's works express anger, he did not attack the white society in a direct way, but he used soft protest (213).

2.3.3 Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

Countee Cullen is one of the most representative voices of the Harlem Renaissance. He was a prominent African-American poet, novelist, children's writer, and playwright. Cullen graduated from New York University and pursued his education at Harvard. His poetic style was romantic. His works talk about love, beauty and life.

Cullen discussed topics regarding race; he believed that art could minimize the distance between black and white peoples. For Cullen, portraying unpleasant realities would "but strengthen the bitterness of our enemies" and thereby weaken the bridge of art between blacks and whites. He opposed any black writer's work that rejects the unity of races. He published "Dark Tower" column in 1926, where he criticized Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, Cullen pressed Hughes not to be a "racial artist" and to omit jazz rhythms from his poems (Poetry Foundation).

Although Cullen disagreed with racial poetry and called for the oneness of races, he was so offended by the racial injustice in America. He gave voice to racial protest in his works such as *Color, The Ballad of the Brown Girl, On These I Stand*. 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 (qtd in Perry 214)

He married Ida Mae Roberson on September 27, 1940. After his death, his wife devoted her life to the activity of gathering materials about Cullen and other Negro writers (15). Throughout his lifetime, Cullen represents 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) Furthermore, 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).

2.3.4 Richard Wright (1908-1960)

Born in 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi, Richard Wright was an influential literary figure and among the first African American writers to protest white treatment of blacks. His works influenced an entire generation of black writers, from Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry and James Baldwin in the United States, to George Lamming and Camara Laye in the Caribbean and in Africa (The New York Public Library).

Wright had begun writing as early as 1924, but the southern environment was "too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings," he later wrote (Kinnamon & Fabre 65). Therefore, he joined the northward migration. In 1932 he joined the Communist Party. In 1937 Wright became Harlem editor of the Communist Daily Worker in New York City. However, in 1944 he left the Communist Party

because of political and personal differences (Encyclopædia Britannica).

In 1938 he published his first book *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of short stories, in which he questions the fate of black man living in country that denies his humanity. His most influential work, *Native Son*, was published the following year. Wright's next book, *Black Boy*, published in 1945 was on the bestseller list of the year. *Black Boy* gives an account of his personal life in the South.

The author decided to settle permanently in Paris in 1947. He said in one of *Ebony* magazine articles "*I Choose Exile*" (1949) that he travelled to France looking for freedom, and he eventually found that freedom there (BlackPast.org). After World War II, Wright settled in Paris as a permanent expatriate where he wrote three expatriate novels, *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954) and *The Long Dream* (1958). These novels were successful in France but not well received in America. (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Wright is the first one who claims that the social situation of the blacks leads them to become violent (High 215). Wright also sees human nature as good; "It is society rather than the individual, which is really bad" (215). *White Man, Listen!* (1957) is another Wright's work. It was originally a series of lectures given in Europe. It gives a metaphorical representation of black's situation in America. It highlights the idea that blacks are invisible in the American society and that both blacks and whites use lies for their own benefits (217).

2.3.6 Amiri Baraka (1934)

Amiri Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey. Baraka is an African-American poet, novelist and playwright who have significantly affected the course of African-American literary culture. Baraka was also an influential black nationalist and later became a Marxist (Poetry Foundation). He was famous for his provocative works that reflected the painful experiences and suppressed anger of black Americans in a white-dominated society (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Baraka attended Howard University, where in 1954 he earned his BA in English, and then joined the United States Air Force. After three years of service, Baraka received a dishonorable discharge because he was suspected of having communist affiliations. Afterwards, Baraka moved to Manhattan where he attended graduate school at Columbia University. There he joined Greenwich Village artists, musicians, and writers. He became a prominent artist in the Village and befriended Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. The following year he married Hettie Cohen and began co-editing the poetry magazine *Yugen* with her (biography.com).

He first published the work of Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. In 1961, Baraka published his first major collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. He wrote two plays in 1962, *The Slave and The Toilet*, both reflect his increasing opposition and mistrust of white society. He gained fame with the production of his 1964 play, *The Dutchman*, which addressed racial tensions and American blacks' repressed hostility toward whites. The controversial play won an Obie Award and was made into a film. After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, Baraka moved to Harlem, where he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre. The company produced many anti-white plays prior to its closure in the late 1960s. In 1967, Baraka moved back to Newark where he founded the Spirit House Players, which produced, among other works, two of Baraka's plays against police brutality: *Police and Arm Yrself or Harm Yrself*. In 1968, Baraka became a Muslim. In the mid-1970s he became a Marxist, but his goals remained the same (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Among Baraka's other works are *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), *Black Magic: Collected Poetry 1961–1967* (1969), *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984), and the piercing *Tales of the Out & Gone* (2006). Baraka wrote many poems. Some speaks about love while others about pain. He hated the white community for the pain he received from its ill-treatment. 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 (High 218).

Baraka was fired from his position as New Jersey's poet laureate after he published the poem *Somebody Blew Up America* (2001), which suggested that Israel and American leaders knew of the 9/11 attacks before they happened. Baraka taught at many universities, including poetry at the New School for Social Research in New York, literature at the University of Buffalo, and drama at Columbia University. He also taught at San Francisco State University, Yale University and George Washington University. He also served as professor of Africana Studies at the State University of New York in Stony Brook for 20 years (poets.org).

2.3.7 Gwendolyn Brooks (1917)

Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas. She is one of the most distinguished 20th Century American poets. She is also the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize. Brooks grew up in Chicago, Illinois. Her works generally deal with the everyday life of urban blacks and their endless struggle against racism and poverty (biography.com).

Brooks graduated from Wilson Junior College in Chicago in 1936. In 1945, she published her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, which reflects the reality of oppression in the lives of urban blacks. The book was an immediate success. She published her second book, *Annie Allen*, in 1949. The book won her the Pulitzer — the first ever given to an African American (Encyclopædia Britannica).

In the early 1960s, Brooks became a teacher of creative writing. She taught at Columbia College in Chicago, Chicago State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin. Her third book of poetry, *The Bean Eaters*, published in 1960. The book explores themes of poverty. In

fact, it is about a couple who live on eating beans mostly. Brooks says in the poem:

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.
Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.
And remembering . . .
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,
tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes (Brooks 1-11)

Brooks also wrote a book for children, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956). Brooks wrote a poem in 1968, *Malcolm X*, which describes the black leader Malcolm X (Hight 220). In 1967 Brooks had new visions; she started using a more simple writing style to convey her themes more strongly and effectively. Thus, increase the reader's level of racial awareness. She also favored free verse over traditional poetic forms, and she increased the use of her vernacular to make her works more understandable for African Americans. This change can be traced in works such as *Riot* (1969), *Aloneness* (1971), *Family Pictures* (1971), the autobiographical (description of her own life) *Report from Part One* (1972), *The Tiger Who Wore White Gloves: Or, What You Are You Are* (1974), *Beckonings* (1975), and *Primer for Blacks* (1980) (poetryfoundation.org).

Brooks' hope for racial harmony has always been the main concern of her verse, But because of the disappointment resulting from the disagreements and lack of unity among members of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the late 1970s, her positive feelings was replace with a mood of anger. This atmosphere is reflected in *Beckonings* (1975) and *To Disembark* (1980), where she urged African Americans to break free from the controls of white American society and seemed to favor violence and disorder as acceptable ways of achieving that freedom (notablebiographies).

2.3.8 Maya Angelou (1928)

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. She was an author, poet, playwright, stage and screen performer, and civil rights activist. Angelou is best known for her series of autobiographies, which examine the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression.

Angelou attended public schools in Arkansas and later California. She gave birth to a son at age sixteen. She was also the first African American female streetcar conductor in San Francisco, California. Angelou's first autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), gained her popularity and was nominated for the National Book Award. The book describes Angelou's life up to age sixteen, providing a child's point of view about the confusing world of adults. It also offers insights into the social and political climate of the 1930s. In 1966 Angelou produced *Blacks! Blues! Black!* (Aired 1968), a National Educational Television series about the role of African culture in American life. She also acted in several movies such as *Poetic Justice* (1993) and *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995) and appeared in other television programs, including the miniseries *Roots* (1977). Angelou won a Tony Award nomination for her performance in *Look Away* (1973). In 1998 she made her first attempt at film directing with *Down in the Delta* (1998). The documentary *Maya Angelou: and Still I Rise* (2016) portrays her life through interviews with Angelou and her intimates and admirers. Concerning poetry, Angelou received a Pulitzer Prize for her work

Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore IDiie (1971). Other Angelou's poems, and *Still I Rise* (1976), *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1993), and *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1997), discuss social and political issues that are important to African Americans. Despite her lack of a college education, Angelou became a professor of American studies at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Among numerous honors was her invitation to compose and deliver a poem, "*On the Pulse of Morning*," for the inauguration of U.S. Pres. Bill Clinton in 1993. In 1993 she was honored by receiving an invitation to deliver a poem, *On the Pulse of Morning* for the inauguration of U.S. President Bill Clinton in 1993. In the year 2000 she was honored by President Clinton with the National Medal of Arts (Encyclopædia Britannica).

2.4 The Main Literary Genres

Black literature has an important impact on the shaping of American life, history, and culture. The free Africans in the North, and those who had escaped from slavery in the South, made their mark upon the white society and awakened the consciousness of the nation. 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.

Contemporary novelists usually focus on romantic and realistic fiction. African American writers rely on folk traditions of masking to convey ideas for the black audience and provide the white audiences with surface meanings (Bell 116). Many black writers use this technique such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brooks. Thus, African American literature succeeded to capture the attention of the public (63). 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*, *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 century.

2.5 The Themes of Contemporary African American literature

The twentieth century witnessed an explosion of African American writing and an expansion of the subjects of black literature. Since the 1970's, it has become difficult to generalize the major themes of the contemporary period. However, the most important subjects include the rise of African American writings, the reclamation of history, and the resurgence of autobiography (471).

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. 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). These contemporary writers continued to write black literature that has a long and rich tradition; the years of black anger are not over as there will be new explosions in the coming years (High 221).

2.6 Conclusion

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African American literature developed. The twentieth century marked the most productive period in African American literary genres since black authors have created remarkable fiction. They won some literary prizes in the United States and in the world. In addition, this period saw the development of African American literature that became an institutionalized field within the area of historical and literary studies.

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

General Conclusion

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

After the Civil War, several black writers emerged such as W.E.B Du Bois. They wrote about the conditions of the blacks in U.S.A. Later, as the white society started to pay attention to the African American writings, black writers used genres like fiction to tackle these issues. In addition, African American writings during the twentieth century dealt with the era of slavery to understand the present.

This research work attempts to show the reader how African American literature developed throughout time. In addition, it claims that African Americans deserve equal rights as the white. The themes of African American literature during the twentieth century have developed through writings in different genres which have helped the expansion of literature.

African American history is marked by racism and sorrow. Thus, African American writers focus on racial injustice. They were inspired by the many movements that sought to reclaim African Americans freedom. Indeed, African American literary production reflects the struggle for freedom and a discourse of human rights.

Indeed, black literature helped the American community solving many racial problems that would have had otherwise threatened its security and progress. In fact, black literature is one of the main reasons why Americans and African Americans could live together in peace; it was the bridge that linked whites and blacks. This kind of literature enabled other races to see the hidden truth behind slavery by exposing the bitter realities of blacks in America. It disproved the claim that slavery civilizes and

educates Africans. Unlike white literature that gave a wrong image about the African continent and its people, black literature gave a true representation of African history and culture; and thus, disproved the concept of superior white and inferior black. Moreover, Black literature succeeded to promote the idea of justice and equality of races. Overtime, people started to believe that African Americans deserve equal life opportunity. Consequently, slavery was abolished. The abolishment of slavery caused a dramatic change at the level of the economic, political, and social structure of the American society.

Racism formed a great challenge for blacks in America; they suffered from whites' ill-treatment and rejection of society. Many black writers examined the problem of racism in their works and tried to find solutions to it. After many attempts, they succeeded to overcome this problem and gain respect within the white community.

In other words, the issue racism and inequality are what led to the emergence and development of African American literature. The more blacks were discriminated and alienated the more they protested about the situation; their protest took the form of literary and oral works. The intensified racism and inequality became the more literary works were produced and the more visible and stronger black literature became. On the basis of this equation, the long struggle between black writers and racism and inequality played a major role in the evolution of black literature.

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