

DEMOCRATIC AND POPULAR REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA

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The Development of African American Literature

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Presented by:

Aicha DEROUICHE

Nabila MIRAOUI

Supervised by:

Dr. ZIDANE Rahmouna

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Dedication 1

Every challenging work needs self efforts as well as some support from those who are very close to our heart.

I dedicate this work to my parents whose love, affection and encouragement make me able to get such success.

Great thanks to my brother “Samir” who supported me and encouraged me to believe in myself and to my sister “Ouassila” who helped me in every moment.

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Aicha

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First of all I dedicate this piece of work to my parents
for their eternal love.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

In America, racism spread around the country especially in the South. Black people were treated badly. 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 skill in writing to reflect on their life. Thus, they have reached an artistic level and produced creative works.

This research work deals with African American Literature which has appeared due to some historical circumstances. It provides the readers with an overview of this kind of literature beginning from the seventeenth century with the importation of African slaves by European till the twentieth century which was characterized by the development of African American works in the field of literature.

This research work is divided into two main chapters. The first chapter gives the background of the history of African American since both history and literature are combined together and each one leads to the other. In fact, African American literature could not exist without the appearance of African Americans' suffering in American history. In addition, the reader will be provided with the main African American movements from the colonial to the contemporary era.

Early African American literature is different from twentieth century African American literature in terms of literary genres, themes and writers. The second chapter of this research work attempts to describe African American literature and shows the developments in this kind of literature throughout history. In addition to black writers' works including slave narratives and autobiographies, drama, poetry and fiction gave diversity to the literary genres of the period.

This chapter mentions some famous writers of the twentieth century and their works which are considered as important. Moreover, it shows the appearance of women writers who reached a high level in writing and obtained the highest literary prizes and rewards. This chapter explains the features of twentieth century African American literature, its themes and genres with an attempt to show reader the difference between African American literature produced in the past and the one written become during the twentieth century.

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

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African American Literature

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1.1 Introduction

This research work concerns the field of African American literature. In America precisely in the South, there were laws that kept black Americans in low social position. In addition, there were organizations which used violence against them. 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.

In the first chapter of this research work, the reader will be provided with 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 Historical Background of African American Literature

Before understanding the origin of African American literature, it is important to know the main issues of that period. The issue 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 ideas 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 brutal and ugly people (01).

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).

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).

1.2.1 The Colonial Period (1746-1800)

During the colonial period, African-American literature represents the divided self of Africans who were forced to go to colonial America .They were lost between their home land and their new identity. Some of them survived and the others died because of sickness and suicide. In 1700, Sewall declares that “It is likewise most lamentable to think, how in taking Negroes out of Africa, and setting them here, that which God has joined together men do boldly rend asunder; Men from their country, husbands from their wives, parents from children” (Bruce 17) . 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).

Due to the issue of racism, many African-American writings were not recognized 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 and experiences with the audience. They described their lives before slavery in Africa and their daily activities. They portrayed the suffering felt by husbands and wives separated from each other as well as the separations of brothers from sisters and children from parents. Those stories suggest a kind of awareness of the issues of slavery (Dickson 20).

Most slaves adopted the religion of their masters which played an important role in early African American literature. "The religious concerns of early African-American writers reflects life in puritan America which dictated that literature be used, it served as a means of moral instruction" (77).

During the colonial period, African-American slaves were prohibited from learning some skills such as reading and writing. Thus, they used their creative abilities such as songs, folk tale and oral storytelling to talk about slavery. These works incorporate the dialect of early black Americans (Smith & Jones 07).

During the American revolutionary war (1775-1781), both Americans and Black soldiers participated together to fight the British. They wanted self-rule, equality and freedom. African-American writers of the period such as Wheatley Lucy Terry Prince, George Moses Horton tackled the status of African Americans and asked for freedom from the British tyranny (07). They discussed white Americans 'self and not slavery.

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 this period, many black slaves focused on the narration of their stories such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Well Brown. Literature at that time 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).

During the nineteenth century, there was a great interest in slaves' revolt. Blacks decided to revolt against the situation. There were strong leaders including Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner in Virginia. Unfortunately, many revolts 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.

She adds that:

In some cases the searchers scattered powder and among their cloths, and then sent other parties to find them, and bring them forward as proof that they were plotting insurrection. Everywhere, men, women and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet (45).

Thus, Jacobs claims that those blacks suffered from the white's violence and they were treated as non human. In 1861, the Civil War broke out between the North and the South over the issue of slavery. Therefore, African American writers' speeches, narratives, poetry and novels served for breaking the Civil War (Brown & Webb 103).

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). Many writers believed in the influence of songs in literature. In this context, Douglass states that:

They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension. They were tones loud, long and deep .They breathed the prayer and complaint the souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains (110).

Frederick Douglass shows the importance of oral tradition in African American literature. He illustrates the relation between the abolitionist movement and literature in the nineteenth century. The variety of African American literature of the antebellum period concerned speeches, plays, novels and poems.

1.2.3 The Reconstruction Period (1865-1900)

Despite the abolition of slavery, the United States was not able to realize the blacks' dream to be equal. Thus, African American writers continued the discussion about the theme of slavery.

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

African American writers used their pen to defend blacks' political freedom. Moreover, African Americans continued emphasizing on many issues of the period such as equal rights for Americans under Pan Africanism. According to Smith and Jones, "Pan Africanism in the Reconstruction period gave African Americans a sense of pride in black history and culture and provided a background to the emphasis on racial identity in literature of the Harlem Renaissance"(115).

African American literature of the period includes the oral traditions such as sermons, speeches, spirituals and stories whose functions were to promote equality. As an example, one can cite Henry Mc Neal Turner's sermon "How Long? How Long? O Heaven?"(155). This sermon represents an important aspect of the oral tradition in African American literature. It addresses racial violence in Southern states (Smith & Jones 115).

In fact, during the reconstruction period, many writers attempted to integrate the oral and written traditions by incorporating 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 focuses 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.

Some social factors such as the abolition of slavery, the gaining of suffrage rights for black men and the feminist movement led African American women to be a vital part of American work after the civil war. They asked for equality in their public and private lives. Due to the institution of slavery, women had to work alongside men. Black female writers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Pauline Hopkins and B. Wells Barnett tackled the role of women in the American society (116).

During reconstruction, African American slaves got freedom. As a result, they could receive 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 supremacy over the African Americans (Haggard xvii). The whites employed violence to maintain dominance over the African Americans.

1.2.4 Harlem Renaissance (1900-1940)

The Harlem writers were attracted by the atmosphere of New York since the main publishing houses were situated there. However, Harlem became the cultural center of the black people as New York City was the one of white. The foundation of the Harlem Renaissance was based on the social and political thoughts of a group of young and talented individuals who were linked by a common black experience (Bloom 05).

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, but they were not receiving the same treatment in the United States. After their return, many African Americans called for the civil rights. The Harlem Renaissance, therefore, constitutes a large basis for the African American population. African American writers came from this city. 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 writers of the era were Zola Neale Hurston, Dorothy West and Claude Mc Kay .They reflected the beauty of Southern vernacular (164). As an example, there is Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1925). It is considered as the best work that resulted from this era. Also, Harlem Renaissance led to the birth of black music including blues and jazz .This kind of music spread around the world not only in the United States. It gave a new spirit to literature especially to poems. One of the first books of poetry is *The Weary Blues*. This collection was written by Langston Hughes (1902-1967). It combined words with music (165).

During the Harlem Renaissance, African American writers such as Angelina Weld Grimke and Marita Bonner improved drama; they analyzed the theme of slavery (166). The Harlem Renaissance is important because of its treatment of different issues ranging from feminism to black aesthetics. It represents a milestone on the road from slavery to freedom for African American artists (167).

1.2.5 The Protest Era (1940-1959)

The end of the Great Depression and the beginning of the Second World War represent the period of political protest for black Americans. The main purpose of the protest period is to eliminate racism. The era of protest was either overt or covert. These protests were for the sake of gaining freedom from slavery (Smith & Jones 468).

During this period, there was a great emphasis on the economic problems. 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).

Also, they claim that:

The protests of this period were nonviolent. Most of them were organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Other protests were made by African American publication such as The Atlanta, Daily World, The Norfolk Journal Guide and The Chicago Defender (469). In addition, many articles in African American press helped to end racial discrimination in the armed forces (469).

Black authors of the period were concerned with how to live with whites rather than going to Africa to escape from racism. As an example, Margaret Walter's poem, *For my People*, expresses pride in African American culture and revealed realities of racial oppression. This poem marks the new era for black women poets who had not published poetry since 1918 (470).

Moreover, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) protested against segregation of black people and the discrimination of the black soldiers. 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, equal pay, housing and equal educational opportunities. 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. For instance, Martin Luther King and Carmichael led hundreds of demonstrations through the Mississippi to explain the relation between blacks and American society. Politics and writing were inseparable. Activists focused on community control of schools, welfare rights, jobs and justice for the poor (Smith & Jones 659).

During the aesthetic movement, Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) and the Congress of African People (CAP) settled international dimensions of the black freedom struggle of the 1960's (Joseph 56). Amiri Baraka helped to establish black aesthetics; most of his writings were against imperialism and colonialism (658).

During the 1960's, black students asked for education relevant to their history of racial oppression. The proponents of the Black Studies Movement of the 1960's and 1970's claimed that the American educational institution had to be transformed (659).

A group of organizations were led by women such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). This organization was controlled by Jennie L. Mouton who 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 race in particular”; she adds that:

Although , there had been conflict among African American women at the political level over the strategies of resistance, black women’s organizations carried out . It contains solidarity on a wide range of issues across class, color, poor and working class. American women joined white American women for the sake of ending discrimination (Collier & Franklin 23).

Between 1954 and 1965, the Civil Rights Movement started to be accepted. This period involved protests, marches, beating and boycotts . These years were the starting point of black voting rights. They represent the heroic period of the Civil Rights movement (Joseph 03). This movement helped African Americans to overcome racism.

From 1970 till the present, the American society changed. The protest aspect of American literature has remained. In this period, black literature became an important part of university curriculum (743). In addition, African American women’s voices began to be heard as a result of the women’s movement and Civil Right Movement. Music was another means for African Americans to express themselves. The most famous one was Rap music. It focused on realities such as drug abuse, violence and teenage (744). In the beginning of 1980, 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 writers represent novelists, short story writers, poets and playwrights. They began using different forms from slave narratives to fiction. They are represented in American literary movements including realism, naturalism and modernism.

1.3.1 African American Literary Realism (1865-1914)

Realism has been given many definitions. According to the Oxford Companion to American Literature, realism is a “term meaning truth to the observed facts of life”. Howells states that realism came as a reaction to the changes taking place in America in the nineteenth century. It is more than a reflection of social reality; it is its reconstruction (34). In this context, Chesnut says:

I’m going to refer briefly to some (literature), and point out how in these writings the Negro has been used, then leave it to you whether or not there has been such a portrayal of his life and character as I have said “true realism”, and therefore true art should give (430).

William Dean Howells refers to American realism as “the truthful presentation of materials” (01).

African American literature is a distinct form that flourished after the end of the Civil War. During this time, it ignored notion of romance and used realism as a literary device. Before the war, Americans asked for human rights and the abolition of slavery. However, early nineteenth century American writers, including African Americans attempted to write prose involving realism (Francis 10).

Most of the African American authors of the Harlem Renaissance used realism. Many of them employed this literary device to fight racial issues. However, others used realism to portray African American life (01).

American realism has been neglected by black writers as they gave more importance to the romantic works between the Civil War and First World War. The novelist Chesnut claims that “there have been few realist fiction of African American life” (186).

During this period, black authors did not focus on mainstream realism which exposes race relation in the South to maintain the white audience. The main realistic authors were Chesnut, 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 is a literary approach that explores the themes that have a relation with the growth of science in the late nineteenth century. “It meant that human behavior is solely under the control of heredity and social environment” (Hakutani 02). During this time, scientific discourse led to the emergence of literary naturalism. Naturalist writing often depicts the limitations and restrictions imposed on individuals’ freedom. In fact, the stronger example of the denial of freedom is revealed in the system of slavery in the United States and the continuous linkage of the slaves’ position with inferiority (258).

During the nineteenth century, the scientific discourse led to the emergence of literary naturalism. The perpetuation of slavery and racial segregation pushed African American naturalists to criticize slavery and the effects of racism (258).

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. As an example, *Black Boy*, which is a novel written by Wright, has a great impact on African American literary criticism(02).

Other black writers like Ellison began to believe that literary naturalism was a burden. It was not a technique for expressing African American reality. In this context, 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 that order” (201).

According to Pizer, African American naturalists took the responsibility of addressing legal and scientific distinction as they became affected by the political and economic system (Dudley 258).

1.3.3 African American Modernism

Modernism is a movement in art and thought that started in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Recently, it has been shaped by African American contributions primarily in the field of music with ragtime, blues, and jazz (Jacques Preface). Modernism emerged when a minority of African Americans lived among the whites in the cities by sharing less public space. It was the moment of the emergence of the racial ghettos inhabited by African Americans (01).

Artists used modernist poems and songs to transmit truth. One of the achievements of modernism is its ability to convey meaning in ordinary language. In this context, Karl suggests that “Language is no longer the primary agent in its old form of communication or as creating subject-object relationships” (16). He adds that “The page or territory is primary, on which language wanders like a lonely adventurer hoping to survive emptiness and whiteness”. Thus, he claims that language turns into a form of music, becoming not only a visual image but an aural one as well (16).

The tactility of language appeared through African American vernacular speech which is part of the larger culture (Karl17). Modernism represented the African American imaginary aiming at rethinking of the status of black culture within the American culture (16).

In the modernist era, the use of African American music in written works did not show the author’s awareness of racial matters. In fact, music such as blues and jazz was used by authors for various purposes including social commentary and political protest. Thus, there is a connection 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)

The neorealism movement is related to European realism that was established in the nineteenth century. It describes life as it is actually lived rather than giving an idealized portrait of the world. It explains the material nature of life as it is. African American literature started to depict realistic life. Slave narratives and autobiographies were the main genre of this period. In this era, writings emphasized on the life of a society and the

pressure of their community (Dickson-Carr 177). They were very important because they were based on truth and they were used to talk about the black in a racist country. Therefore, neorealism in African American literature focuses on the real life experiences of black people (Smith 742). Contemporary African American neorealism generally focused on the purpose of giving reflections of the life of African American communities.

During this period, there was diversity in African American literature. All the genres were presented. The most famous 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

The United States was founded as a country based on justice and equality but it failed to apply these values on African Americans. Hence, the black liberation movement emerged. Literature was a way for black Americans to defend their social situation. It has described the struggles of African Americans with slavery and racism. It contains the portrayals of African American experiences.

This kind of literature has been given different names such as black literature, Negro literature, colored literature as well as African American literature which was a response to the lived reality and the fact of segregation.

African American writers shed light on many phases of black life in the state of America. They were looking for their identities. Their works such as poetry, autobiographies, fiction and essays helped to form the African American literature. Consequently, black writers made a change by affecting their social reality and the literature that had been produced in response to it. The latter witnessed a change from the period of slavery to the present century. The next chapter will deal with twentieth century African American literature.

Chapter Two:

*Contemporary African
American literature*

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to give an overall view of contemporary African American literature by describing the background of the historical events that marked its development. It focuses on famous African American writers of the period. The reader is provided with a brief presentation of some authors' works. In addition, the chapter will introduce some important issue including African American writers, the main themes and the main literary genres in contemporary African American literature.

2.2 Historical Background of Contemporary African American literature

African American literature has attempted to tell uncomfortable truth. It began with slave narratives. Thus, prose was transformed during the nineteenth century into the protest novel (King & Moody-Turner xi). During the contemporary period, African American authors and artists represent an important part of American literature. Their works were rejected for a long time till the twentieth century. Contemporary African American literature was the beginning point for a new change as slavery and racial segregation became less important subjects (xi). This period is supposed to be the golden age of African American literature. Black American writers want to prove their skill and express the pride of being black. In comparison to the previous generation of writers, there was a remarkable difference in their works (Andrewset al. 14).

The First World War led to racial conflict which was influential in the continuing African American struggle in the years following 1918 (Ellis 284). It allowed African American writers to talk about the racial politics of the U.S.A. In this context, Richard Wright says:

Our black boys do not die for liberty in Flanders. They die in Texas and Georgia, Atlanta is our Marne. Brownsville, Texas, is our Chateau-Thierry. It is a lesson we will never forget; it is written into the pages of our blood, into the ledgers of our bleeding bodies, into columns of judgement figures and balance figures and balance statements in the lobes of our brains (284).

African American soldiers had fought in France. This war revealed the second class status of African Americans as they faced policies of segregation even if they would contribute to the war effort in a financial and physical way (285).

The African American press in U.S.A reacted to the events of the war .Thus, poetry was printed. It was called Partisan Poetry; it was written by editors, clergymen soldiers or professional readers. During the war, such poetry was a vehicle for expressing African American patriotism and sacrifices (290). Some Poets published in African American newspapers and magazines such as *The crisis* and *The NAACP's House*. Such poetry includes *The Crusader* and *The Universal Negro Improvement Association's Negro World*. Later, much of this poetry was published in collection; it involves a number of themes such as the heroism and patriotism of African American soldiers who fought two battles one against the Germans and one against domestic racial prejudice (287).

One example is Roscoe Jamison's *Prayer to the Flag*:

Thou art my flag. I lose thee still,

In spite of them who rend, and swear

Thee with bade crime, who seek to kill

My people's hopes with baleful sneer
I lose thee still, and now I lift
My eyes to thee on high above,
To pray thee for the promised gift
Of freedom for the race I love
E'er thy stars mount dim Europe's skies,
To cheer brave hearts to Victory,
I pray thee hear my people's cries
Here in the Home-land, set men free (287)

This poem depicts African American sacrifices in the war and suggests that they should be rewarded because of their actions.

Poetry expressed a liberal perspective on race relations in the war claiming that African American's bravery may change white American attitudes towards them. In this sense, Leslie Pinckney Hill, *Dixie's Black Men* (1992), asserts that

They said they were too slow, too dull, too this and that to do it,
They couldn't match the method of the Han,
And then to arm a million- why, the land would surely rue it
If a million blacks were taught to use a gun,
But right won out, and they went in at all detractors smiling

They learned as quick as any how to shoot
They took the prize at loading ships, and riveting and piling
And trained a thousand officers to boot (288).

Moreover Partisan Poetry was used to show African Americans in Civic participation. In 1917 and 1918, this type of poetry reflected a sense of progressive hope claiming that African American sacrifices to the U.S war can result in better conditions for African Americans (288). However, these hopes vanished after the end of the war; when the veterans returned, they looked for work. However, race riots terrorized African American communities in many cities especially in Washington and Chicago. That year was called the red summer as it witnessed a hike in the number of lynchings (290).

In the 1920's, these reactions led to the emergence of cultural productivity known as the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance. Hence, African Americans were controlled by the feeling of betrayal and disappointment at U.S government. As a result, New Negro Renaissance focused on cultural mobility from a Southern rural to a Northern urban culture (290).

African American poets, novelists and painters were influenced by the experience of the war. *There is Confusion* is a novel written by Jessie Redmon Fauset in 1924. It describes how women responded to the social and political shifts of wartime and the disappointment of returning veterans (191). The novel represents provocative reflections on the conflict for African Americans as well as depiction of battle scenes and the experiences of African American combatant in France. In addition, Victor Daly's *Not Only War* (1932) is a novel that differs from Fauset's *There is Confusion* by being more autobiographical. *Not Only War*, therefore, shows a reluctance to endorse the African Americans potential for nation (296).

World War Two had great impact on African Americans and their lives in America. The expression of anger and despair of African Americans was found in several novels of the 1950's and 1960's. With the development of the Civil Rights movement, African American literature appeared on the American scene. There were writers such as Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka and others who have written fiction to highlight the tragedy of the African American experience (Rangno 13).

During the 1960's black American literature was in the midst of a second renaissance. This period witnessed the emergence of the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City as well as the radical Black Arts movement in drama and poetry (Stephens 26).

During the twentieth century, black American writers have produced all literary genres. For instance, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is an example of fiction representing the new imagining of slavery rather than presenting the tale of a male slave beginning with Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* in 1853 (26).

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).

In the early twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois and the other younger generation of artists such as Langston Hughes, Zola Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce tried to delimit the meaning of their art. These writers

did not search to be believed by whites, but they still had to depend on criticism of the white. Many whites started thinking about blacks' tragic past; some black writers like Nikki Giovanni do not want the white to pity them. She says: "I really hope no white person even has cause to write about me because they never understand... and they will probably talk about my hard childhood and never understand that I was quiet happy" (221). 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

Poetry, oral and slave narratives gave richness and diversity for the writing of the twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements played a great role in the development of African American literature. Many well known black writers appeared including Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Cullen, Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Amiri Baraka and Brooks. They wrote about their personal experiences and the situation of the blacks in the American society. They used their fiction and poetry to end segregation and protect civil rights. The writers of Harlem Renaissance were influenced by the style of European and American literature (High 212). They created works of high quality.

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

In literature, the struggle of the blacks for their rights began with Du Bois' *The Souls of Black folk* (1903). This book is a work of sociology rather than fiction, Du Bois describes the effects of racial prejudice on the culture of black Americans and provides an overview of African American life. 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.

2.3.2 Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes is another leader of Harlem Renaissance. He helped many black writers to publish their works. He was interested in the jazz and blues of black music. In ‘Dream Variations’ (1992), He says:

Dance! Whir! Whir

Till the quickday is done

Night coming tenderly

Black like me. (213)

Langston Hughes's poem, *Aunt Sue's Stories*, is based on his experience drawn from his grandmother's tales about his ancestors. As a child Langston listened attentively to these tales of slavery which were real stories. He was proud of this tradition and decided to make something to serve his race. Moreover, his poem, *The Negro Speak of Rivers* focuses on slavery and speaks about slaves who were sold down the rivers. In this context, he says:

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).

The idea of the poem came to him as he looked out of the windows while the train was crossing the Mississippi; then, he started thinking of that river (Leach 12).

In the fifties, his works expressed 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)

His 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)

Cullen is a black poet who wrote for all mankind. He was not sure that the world may listen to a black poet. In his poem, he says:

Yet do I marvel at these curious things

To make a poet black and bid him sing! (214)

He was a romantic poet; his attitudes and his deep thinking influenced his personal life. 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 (Perry 15).

In his works, Cullen talks about love, beauty and life. Cullen's works make the readers feel the pain of being black in America. In this context, he claims that:

So, in the dark, we hide the heart that bleeds,

And wait, and tend our organizing seeds (214)

Throughout his lifetime, Cullen expressed the desire to be regarded only as a poet and not a Negro poet. In this sense, 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)

During the twentieth century, black literature needed realistic techniques. Writers such as Richard Wright put emphasis on the black experience, violence, hostility and color. These themes became more prominent in this era. During the twentieth century, black literature needed realistic techniques. This is what Wright employed in his short stories. For instance, in his novel, *Uncle Tom's children* (1938), Wright gives a description of the violence of the Southern white society against the blacks. In his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), he says "All my life had shaped me for the realism" (214).

Wright employs the literary movement of his period that is naturalism which focuses on economic determination and materialism. He uses naturalist techniques to describe the social and psychological pressures on his black hero like he does in his novel *Native Son* which introduces a black protagonist, Bigger Thomas, who is affected by the racial injustice of American institutions. This character influenced by his environment and treated with harsh manner. In this novel, many black writers describe blacks as victims of the white violence. However, Wright is the first one who claims that the social situation of the blacks leads them to become violent (High 215).

Many critics claim 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). Moreover, Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1945) represents a metaphore 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 has deeply influenced other writers; among them, there was Chester Himes who began writing in prison (Smith 853).

2.3.5 James Baldwin (1924-1987)

He was born in August 1924 at Harlem, New York City, to an unmarried old woman called Emma Berdis Jones. Three years after his birth; his mother married David Baldwin who was laborer Baptist minister. With him, she had eight children. Her husband became angry, abusive and violent. Thus, he terrorized his wife and children .This problematic relationship with his step- father pushed Baldwin to express his suffering. He died in Southern France in 1987 (Nelson 12).

Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) is a short story about religion in Harlem. In this period, religion created strong emotions. It influenced People's life. On the other hand, it destroyed their ability to see the real life (High 217). Baldwin's second novel was *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Hence, these two novels deal with psychological problems. In his novel, *In another Country* (1962), Baldwin expresses anger. This novel is his best work of fiction. This anger appears in other works such as the collection of essays entitled *The Fire Next Time* published in 1963 (218).

Baldwin claims that non violent methods 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)

"Le Roi Jones" is a poet, playwright and critic. His poetry, dramas well as cultural and political activity dominated African American letters during the 1960s and 1970s. He helped to define the Black Arts Movement and influenced the next generation of writers. He wrote plays and poetry which claim that blacks are better than whites. He changed his name to an African one Amiri (Prince) and Baraka (Blessedness). His poetry is very violent (High 218).

Baraka's play *Dutchman*, which was published in 1964, depicts a surrealistic confrontation between a white woman and a black man who face violent and complex racism; this play exposed racism America never seen before on stage in U.S.A. He used a simple language such as the dialect of poor blacks. Most of his plays were presented in black theatre (218). 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's prolific productions include 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 Gwendolyn Brooks (1917)

She was a young child when her family moved to the South of Chicago. This city influenced Brook's works. In 1945, she published her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronz Ville*, which presents the life of Americans in the Chicago suburb. In 1949, she published another collection of poems, *Annie Allen*, in which she tells the tragedy of the black life in America; she tries to present the Negroes. Anger began to appear in her works. Her poem *Malcolm x* (1968), describes this black leader as the father of a new frightening strength (High 220).

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).

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. Each writer has influenced African American literature. These writers used folktales, spirituals and blues within the traditional framework like Langston Hughes's poetic use of blues to redefine stanzas, or Amiri Baraka's recreation of the short story as a jazz composition (Jones 01).

2.3.8 Maya Angelou (1928)

She was born on April 4, 1928. She attended George Washington High School. She studied dance and drama at the California Labor School. Three weeks later after completing school, at the age of 16, Angelou gave birth to her son, Clyde. She writes about these events and the first 17 years of her life in her first book, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* published in 1970 (Sickels 17).

The book won popularity and was nominated for the National Book Award. Her poetry book, *Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diie* (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 hope for freedom represent one of the major themes that appear in Angelou's work. The Caged Bird symbolizes this theme as it depicts a voice of a protest. Angelou's writings show the realities of racism and the ways the African Americans have resisted oppression. She depicts hopes and compassion in her books. She also focuses on the theme of motherhood and the relationships among African American women (19).

2.4 The Main Literary Genres

Contemporary novelists usually focus on romantic and realistic fiction. In their works, they use dialect such as Harper's *Century* and *The Atlantic*. 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). Writers like Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brooks developed their craft. 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 the only place to depict reality and provide opportunities to focus on social problems. The theatrical possibilities of folk materials were explored (Graham & Ward 423).

The history of early contemporary African American literature has been influenced by Lorraine Hansberry and her popular award winning play, "A Raisin in the Sun", which was first staged in 1959. However, the film version was released in 1961. Hansberry's play won her the New York Drama Critics Award, making her the first black woman to receive it (471).

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 influenced cultural production in music, theater, art, dance and literature (Andrews et al. 471).

Many black writers of the twentieth century needed to write novels in a variety of forms including realist historical accounts such as Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977) and Barbara Chase-Ribound's *Shally Heming's* (1979). The other forms involve postmodernist works like Gayl Jone's *Corregidora* (1975), Ishmael Reed's *Fight to Canada* (1976) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) as well as science

fiction novels such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and impressionist texts like Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* published in 1986. Black writers have tackled new literary movements to reinterpret ideas and attack slavery (472).

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. However, they continue to face different 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. Black writers reached a high artistic level especially in the 1920's as the Harlem Renaissance represents an outpouring of creative themes that were not produced before. In addition to this, black writers of the late twentieth century turned their attention to history which constituted an important topic (Miller 03).

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, the resurgence of autobiography, the rise of black gay literature and lesbian literature (Andrews et al. 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. 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).

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 movement for African American freedom. Indeed, African

American literary production reflects the struggle for freedom and a discourse of human rights.

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