



# **National Open University of Nigeria**

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## **ENG313 BLACK DIASPORA LITERATURE I – AFRICAN AMERICAN**

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## **Introduction**

This is ENG313: Black Diaspora Literature I – African American. The course, through a selection of speeches, political pamphlets, essays, autobiographies, poetry, drama and prose fiction of and about African Americans, discusses the processes or forces of history that have shaped life for/among African Americans and how artists and intellectuals have responded to these forces through their writings and oral literary forms. The selection of texts (oral and written) makes efforts at reflecting the varieties of practices, types of writings, the various stages of history they deal with, and the various views on the solutions to the problems of the African American in the American society. The texts range from the 18th Century to the present. You are going to read them paying attention to the effects of point of view, tone and structure on your responses to the works.

This course-guide is a map to take you through the course requirements, activities and texts you will need to embark on this journey into the lives, experiences and writings of the black people in America.

## **Course Aims**

The course, ENG313, explores the history of African Americans through their literature from the 18th Century to the present times. It examines how artists and intellectuals have responded, through their writings, to the historical forces that have shaped the life of the African American. In a more general sense, the course shows the relationship of interdependence between people and their literature.

## **Course Objectives**

To achieve the above-stated aims, the following are the objectives of the course to:

- a. define African American Literature;
- b. explore the African American culture through their writings;
- c. examine the different historical ages/times in the African American literary history;

- d. examine the contributions of selected writers and their writings to the growth/transformation of America's history;
- e. weigh the various criticisms of different aspects of African American literature against one another; and
- f. locate the place of the African American and African American literature in both American and world literatures.

### **What You Will Learn in the Course**

In this course, you will learn what makes up African American literature and why it is different from (having its own space outside and within) what is known as American literature. Historical, intellectual and socio-cultural backgrounds to African American literature will be considered. How the literature in turn has influenced and still influences the African American existence will be explored. The first module for the course lays the foundation for the course by giving a general introduction and conceptual grounding. The second module takes us through the history of the African American and the literature such history has produced. The third module looks at the recent history of African American literature and offers some criticisms of same.

### **Study Units**

ENG313: Black Diaspora Literature I: African American is a 2-Credit Unit compulsory course for 300 level undergraduate students in the Department of English. There are three modules and fifteen units in this course:

#### **Module 1: What is African American Literature?**

Unit 1: What Really Is African American Literature?

Unit 2: Characteristics and Themes of African American Literature

Unit 3: Oral tradition

#### **Module 2: History and African American Literature**

Unit 1: Early African American Literature

Unit 2: Slave narratives and Spirituals

Unit 3: Post-slavery Era

Unit 4: Harlem Renaissance

Unit 5: Civil Rights Movement and Black Art/ Black Power Era

### **Module 3: Recent History and Critiques**

Unit 1: (Re)membering the Black History: Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Unit 2: Female and Feminist Writings: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Ntozake Shange

Unit 3: African American Literature in the Twenty-first Century

Unit 4: The Place of African American Literature and the African American in the American Dream

Unit 5: Exploring the African American Culture through African American Literature

Unit 6: African American Literature as Literature of "Otherness"

Each module opens with a general introduction to capture its overall essence. It lists the units contained therein. Each unit has its contents containing the unit introduction, objectives, main contents, conclusion, summary, tutor-marked assignment and references/further readings.

### **Textbooks and References**

Apart from the references and/or further reading which you will find at the end of each unit, you would need to avail yourself of as many as possible the following recommended texts:

Andrews, W., Foster, F., and Harris, T. (Eds.). (1997). *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Oxford: OUP.

Angelou, Maya. (1969). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House

Baldwin, James. (1995) *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Modern Library (First published in 1953).

Brown, William Wells. (1996). *Clotel or the President's Daughter*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe (First published in 1853).

Douglass, Frederick. (1845). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office.

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1961). *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches*. New York: Fawcett World Library (First published in 1903).

Ellison, Ralph. (1952). *Invisible Man*. New York: Signet.

Garvey, Marcus. (1986). *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey/Africa for the Africans*. Dover, Massachusetts: The Majority Press (First published in 1924)

Garvey, Marcus. (2004). *More Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*. New York: Routledge (First published in 1977).

Hansberry, Lorraine. (1959). *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Random House.

Hill, Patricia et al. (Eds.). (1998). *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of African American Literary Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Hurston, Zora Neale. (1978). *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Illinois: University of Illinois (First published in 1937).

Johnson, James Weldon (Ed.). (1922). *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Jones, Le Roi. (1963). *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: William Morrow.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. (August 28, 1963). "I Have a Dream".  
<http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

McKay, Nellie Y. and Gates, Henry Lewis, Jr. (Eds.). (2004). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2nd Ed.). New York: W. W. Norton.

McMillan, Terry (Ed.). (1990). *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction*. London: Penguin Books.

Morrison, Toni. (1970). *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Morrison, Toni. (2004). *Beloved*. New York: Vintage (First published in 1987).

Walker, Alice. (1982). *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Walker, Alice. (1984). *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. London: The Women's Press.

Washington, Booker T. (1899). *The Future of the American Negro*. Boston: Small, Maynard

Washington, Booker T. (1901). *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*. New York: Doubleday.

Wheatley, Phillis. (1773). *Poems on Various Subjects*. London: A. Bell Bookfeller

Wintz, Cary D. (1985). *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. Texas: Rice University Press.

Wright, Richard. (1940). *Native Son*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

Wright, Richard. (1945). *Black Boy*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

### **Assessments and Assignments**

You will find, in this course, two kinds of assessment – Tutor-Marked Assignments and Self-Assessment Exercises. The assignments are to be submitted to your group tutor for marking and they contribute 40% of the overall score available for this course. The self-assessment exercises are to help you evaluate your progress and understanding of the course as you go on; they are not to be submitted for grading, and you can always seek clarification from your tutor on the ones you find difficult.

## **Final Examination and Grading**

The examination for ENG 313 will take two hours and fifteen minutes and will contribute 60% of the score accruing to the course. You will answer three questions in all. Questions will be in the essay form and you are advised not to spend more than 45mins on a question. If you have judiciously applied yourself to the course material and done your SAEs and TMAs satisfactorily, you should smile your way through the examination.

## **How to Get the Most from This Course**

To get the most out of this course, you will need to avail yourself of the recommended texts and have access to the internet. Ability to enjoy reading voraciously and relating texts to life/historical occurrences is also essential. You will endeavour to do the Self-Assessment Exercises and the Tutor-Marked Assignments in order to measure your understanding of the course.

## **Facilitators/Tutors and Tutorials**

Being a 2-credit unit course, 10 hours of tutorials are provided for the course. You will be notified of your tutorial group, your tutor, and the location, date and time of the tutorials. Your tutor will be glad to put you through grey areas; so you are encouraged to contact him/her should you experience any difficulty in the Self-Assessment Exercises.

## **Summary**

Having been equipped with the map to take you through this course, you cannot but have a rewarding and exciting experience exploring African American Literature. But then, you will agree that the usefulness of a map is dependent on how the user applies its guide. Make the best out of the course guide and enjoy every aspect of the course.



## **MODULE ONE**

## **WHAT IS AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE?**

This module provides a foundation for your journey into the lives and literature of African Americans. It provides a general sketch of what the course offers and will hopefully whet your appetite to discover, through literature, what being black has meant and now means in a place like America.

It is important to understand who the African American is and subsequently the force behind their literature. This is the thrust of the first unit of the module. How to identify African American literature through its features and how this literature is interwoven with the people's social development are explored in the second and fourth units, respectively. The third unit traces the origin of African American literature to oral tradition, a feature that is still seen in very recent African American works.

By the end of this module, you would have been equipped with general basic details of what to likely expect when you pick up an African American text. The four units of the module are as follows:

Unit 1: What Really Is African American Literature?

Unit 2: Characteristics and Themes of African American Literature

Unit 3: Oral tradition

## **UNIT 1      WHAT REALLY IS AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE?**

### **CONTENTS**

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Objectives

1.3 Main Contents

1.3.1 The African American

1.3.2 African American Literature

1.4 Conclusion

1.5 Summary

1.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment

1.7 References/Further Readings

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

As the course title suggests, this is literature of the black diaspora – African American – giving us a sense of what it is all about: literature of the black people (people of African descent) living outside the African continent, specifically, in America. This unit aims at carving a niche for the phenomenon termed *African American Literature*. Understanding the basics of what you will be dealing with in this course begins with this unit; so do not miss out on the details.

## **1.2 OBJECTIVES**

The unit's objectives are to:

- a. define and give a face to the person of the African American;
- b. give an overview of the experiences that generated what is known as African American literature;
- c. map out what can be called African American literature; and
- d. provide examples of writers in different phases of African American literature.

## **1.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

### **1.3.1 The African American**

People of African descent in America today are called African Americans. Over time and at different times in history, they had been called Negroes, coloured, blacks and Afro-Americans. Because of the negative connotations of the words in the American history, *Negroes* and

*coloured/colored* have become rare in usage in recent times. *Black* and, especially, *African American*, are more favourable terms.

The politics and tension of even the proper name to call this race speak volumes on how they got to America in the first place and what their life experiences have been. The slave trade and slavery of the 17th to 18th centuries is responsible for the presence of most African Americans in the space called the United States of America today. They were mostly required to work in the plantations (rice, cotton, sugar and tobacco); thus slave labour took a very long time to be erased and was done in stages with different parts of America emancipating their slaves at different times. Abolition faced stiff opposition in some states of America with the Southern states being the last to let go because of the economic relevance of the slaves, especially as the crops like cotton have become export crops. With the abolition of slave trade by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865, slavery ended in the United States only in name (Weider History Group, 2013; America's Historical Documents, 2013). The blacks were still under the same kind of demeaning treatment from their white counterparts; only this time it has found other names: racial discrimination, denial of human rights, and the black population were still employed to do menial jobs since industrialisation was still rising.

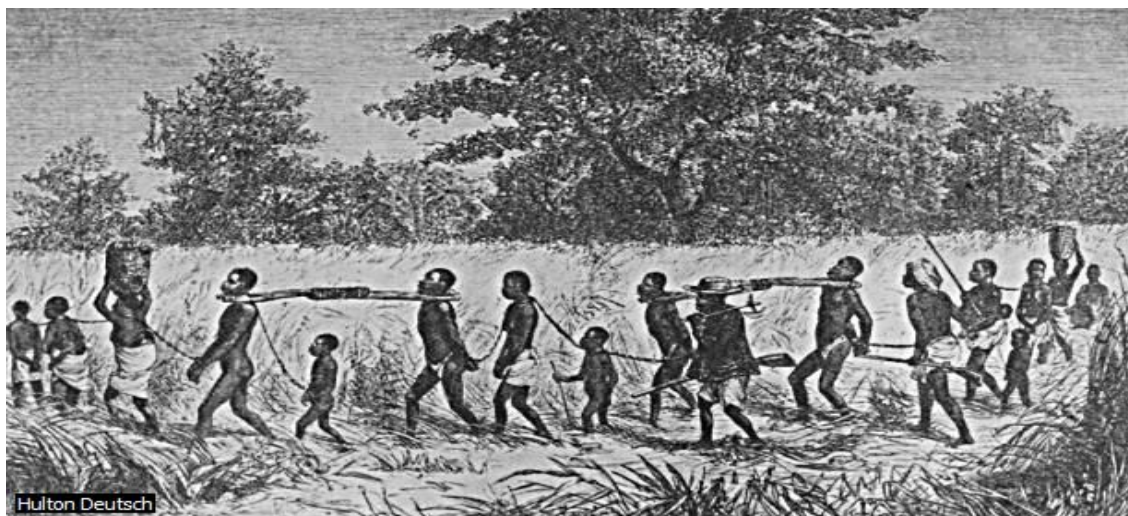
Of course, human beings do not naturally keep quiet when maltreated. Therefore, it is only expected that slave trade, slavery and the accompanying ill treatment raised different reactions from both the black and white quarters, but more from the black side of the divide. Abolitionists went to work with their protests, campaigns, writings, etc. and gradually erased slavery. Other movements would also rise among the African American to champion the cause of the marginalised blacks: Movements which fought against the Jim Crow laws that promoted racial discrimination – Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the early 1900s, the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968) which brought about the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Black Power Movement which encouraged African Americans to look to their African/Black roots for inspiration and emphasised black solidarity.

With Barak Obama, an African American, becoming the 44th president of the United States of America (2009-2017), it is obvious that the blacks have done a lot to shake off discrimination

and marginalisation. But, the journey has not been a smooth one, and there are still instances to show that there might still be traces of their marginalisation.

Pictures tell great stories in ways words do not. For this reason, selected pictures have been chosen to take you through the African American experience. A look at the pictures below will give you an idea of the historical progress of the African American. Take note of the comments and captions that come with the pictures. Also, observe the progress of emancipation as the years roll by with the dates on the picture comments. All the pictures and their accompanying comments have been culled from “African American History” (*Microsoft Encarta, 2009*), with the exception of the pictures of Gordon, the former Slave; Condoleezza Rice; and Barak Obama pictures whose sources are indicated under the pictures.

### Picture 1



### Captives in Central Africa

The first African slaves brought to the English colonies in America arrived in the early 17th century. They were captured in Africa and then transported across the Atlantic Ocean. It is estimated that more than 10 million people were brought from Africa to the Americas as slaves.

Hulton Deutsch

**Picture 2**



**Slaves Picking Cotton**

Cotton was the most important crop in the South before the American Civil War (1861-1865). Slaves usually worked all day picking cotton for their masters while overseers watched from their horses.  
THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE/Corbis

**Picture 3**



**Slave Quarters in the South**

The dirt roads and simple wood houses of these slave quarters lay on the outskirts of New Orleans, Louisiana. The vast majority of slaves living in the United States were located in the South. After the invention of the cotton gin in

1793 and the spread of cotton cultivation in the South, the demand for slave labor on large plantations increased dramatically.

Archive Photos

**Picture 4**



Gordon, a former slave displays the telltale criss-cross, keloid scars from being bullwhipped, 1863. (Photo got from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cicatrices\\_de\\_flagellation\\_sur\\_un\\_esclave.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cicatrices_de_flagellation_sur_un_esclave.jpg))

**Picture 5**



**Harpers Ferry Insurrection**

In 1859 white abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the U.S. arsenal and armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now in West Virginia). He hoped to free slaves by arming them and leading a revolt. In this sketch, U.S. Marines storm the arsenal, which was eventually recaptured. Brown was later convicted of treason and hanged.  
Corbis

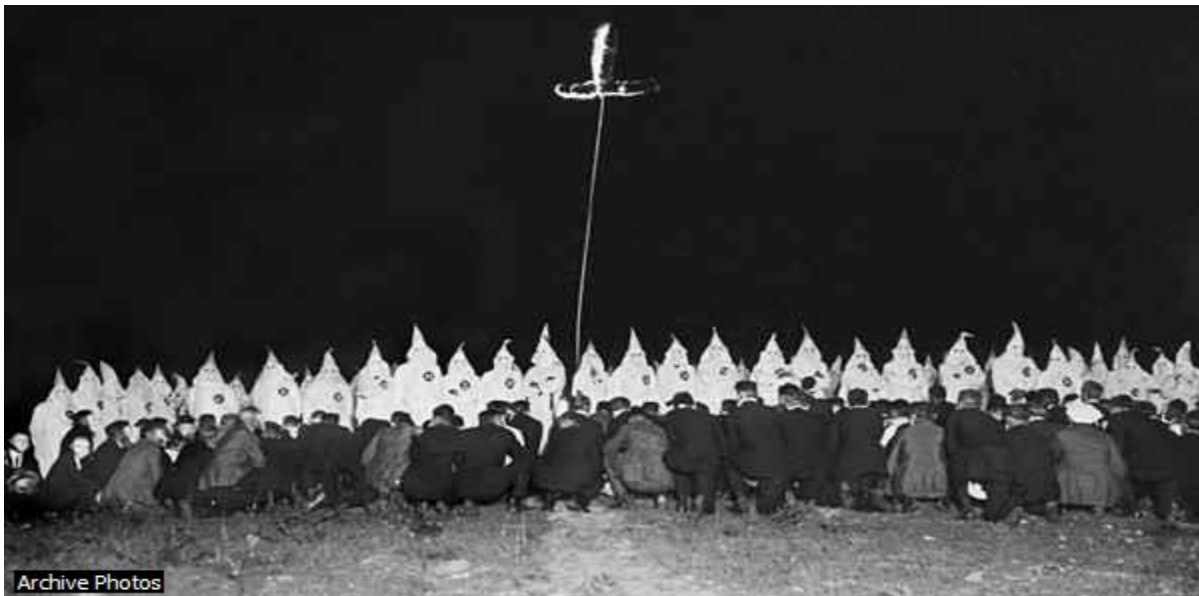
### Picture 6



### Waiting for Rations

Recently freed blacks line up for rations at a Freedmen's Bureau in the American South. The Bureau was formed in 1865 to provide food and medical and legal assistance to the newly emancipated blacks, as well as to needy whites. The program opened several schools and educational institutions before it was abandoned only a few years later.  
Culver Pictures

### Picture 7



## **Ku Klux Klan**

Former Confederate soldiers founded the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) after the American Civil War (1861-1865). The KKK used violence and intimidation to keep blacks segregated and to prevent them from voting and holding office.  
Archive Photos

## **Picture 8**



## **Rosa Parks**

In 1955 Rosa Parks was arrested for disobeying a segregation law in Montgomery, Alabama, that required her to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Her bold action helped to stimulate protests against inequality. The blacks of the community organized a boycott of the bus system and were led by Martin Luther King, Jr. They forced city officials to repeal the discriminatory law.

UPI/THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

## **Picture 9**



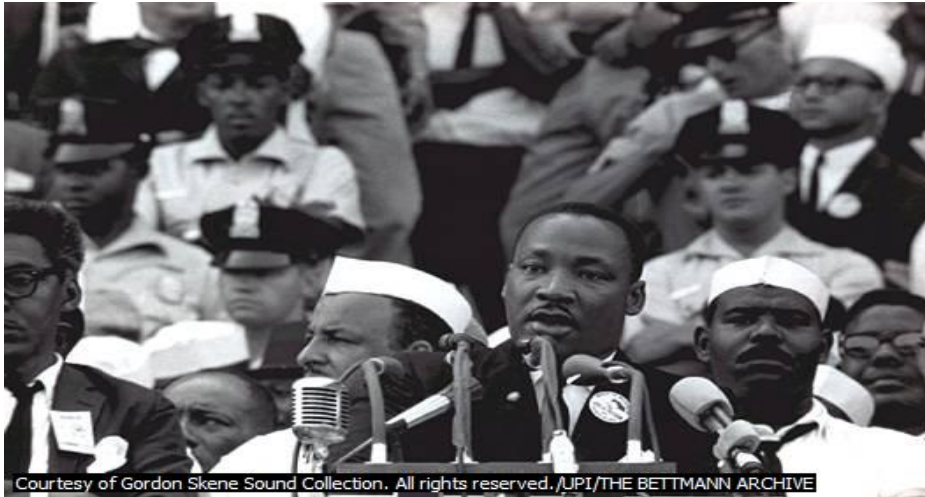


## **Burned Bus in Anniston, Alabama**

Freedom Riders began traveling through the South in 1961 to try to desegregate Southern bus stations. In this picture, Freedom Riders sit by their bus which was burned by a white mob in Anniston, Alabama. Several of the riders were beaten by the mob.

UPI/Corbis

## **Picture 10**



## **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

During the 1950s, Martin Luther King, Jr. studied the methods of nonviolent protest of the Indian nationalist leader Mohandas K. Gandhi and successfully implemented them in a civil rights movement in the United States. King expertly led the movement and forced discussion of inequality in the United States. His work inspired thousands of blacks and led to long-range changes in the lives of countless others. In 1963, five years before his death at the hands of an assassin, King addressed a gathering of more than 200,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial in the nation's capital. There he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Courtesy of Gordon Skene Sound Collection. All rights reserved./UPI/THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

## **Picture 11**



UPI/THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE/Courtesy of the Gordon Skene Sound Collection. All rights reserved.

## **Jesse Jackson**

By the 1960s Baptist minister Jesse Jackson had set himself at the forefront of the struggle for civil rights. In 1971 he founded Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) to work for the economic advancement of poor people. In 1984 and 1988 he campaigned for the Democratic presidential nomination. A gifted orator, Jackson electrified delegates at the 1988 Democratic National Convention with this speech.

UPI/THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE/Courtesy of the Gordon Skene Sound Collection. All rights reserved.

## **Picture 12**



Condoleezza Rice, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (2001–04) and Secretary of State (2005–09). (Photo got from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Condoleezza\\_Rice\\_cropped.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Condoleezza_Rice_cropped.jpg))

## **Picture 13**



Barak Obama, the first African American president of the United States of America (2009 – 2017). (Photo got from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Official\\_portrait\\_of\\_Barack\\_Obama.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Official_portrait_of_Barack_Obama.jpg))

Each of the stages in the African American history represented pictorially and otherwise above has produced remarkable works of literary value which subsequent modules and units will be talking about. It is important therefore to have a mental picture of the conditions of the black people at every turn of their history to be able to assign the right judgment of their literature.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

Examine the living conditions of the African American over time as depicted in the pictures 1 to 13 above.

### **1.3.2 African American Literature**

Generally speaking, African American literature refers to literature by and about African Americans. It could be oral, performed, or written. Recently, the filmic mode (films) is also included in the discussion of not just African American literature but literature all over the world. Historically, African American literature marks and records the growth and development of the African race in America from the 18th century to present.

There might be contentions as to whether works by non-African Americans qualify to be called African American literature. The answer is simple: if the experiences contained in such works are for and about African Americans and have the characteristics and themes for which African American literature are known, then it is African American literature. It is for such reasons that works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Marcus Garvey, for example, are studied under African American literature, even though Garvey is Jamaican, and Stowe is white.

African American literature grew out of the oral tradition of storytelling, work songs of slaves on plantations and spirituals; hence these verbal modes are seen having a great deal of impact still heavily traceable in the literature.

African American literature has significantly contributed to the way African Americans have historically understood themselves and have been understood by the rest of the world. Conversely, these understandings have in no small measure contributed to the substance of African American literature. Hence, African American literature, just like literature in other parts of the world and especially Africa, maintains a symbiotic relationship with its creating/created environment/society. Looking at African American literature, one does not cease to be amazed at the interconnectedness among literature, man and his society, and how historical events/moments produce very rich works of art.

Dasylya and Jegede (2005: 191) give an insight into the nature of African American literature:

By its very naming, *African American* literature is a unique tradition that is informed by a sense of cultural dualism right from inception. Historically, the socio-cultural undercurrent responsible for the emergence of this literature is the experience of slavery and the attendant contact and dialogue of the African personality with a new culture. The Africans who were transported to the United States of America (the New World, as it was known then) took with them the intangible but enduring properties of their cultural heritage; the customs, values, traditions, and histories of African were reprocessed to compose the peculiar experience and vision of the (black) American writer of African descent. Invariably the overriding thematic preoccupation of the black writer in America has been a passionate concern for race and identity, nationhood and dignity, self-integration and self-assertion and a general *quest* for roots and freedom stemming from the physical and psychological dislocation which slavery had caused.

Going by the African American history, their literature has a general (and not a fixed) grouping into:

- a. Early African American literature, where we come in contact with the works like Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) and William Wells Brown's *Clotel The President's Daughter* (1853);
- b. Slave Narratives, which cover works like Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789); Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852);

- c. Post-Slavery Era; it brings us in contact with the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey;
- d. Harlem Renaissance releases us Langston Hughes and Claude McKay's passionate poetry, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937);
- e. Civil Rights Movement Era/Black Art/Black Power sees the flourishing of Martin Luther King Jr's great speeches like "I Have a Dream" (1963), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Amiri Baraka's (earlier known as LeRoi Jones) works.
- f. Recent African American literary works include Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and *The Autobiography of Malcom X* (1965), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* (1969), Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1995).

It will interest you to know that many of these works have been made into films. You can find some of them online and in film shops. Watching them will help you understand and enjoy the texts more.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 2**

Do you think it is right to include works from non-African Americans in the study of African American literature, especially works of whites like Harriet Beecher Stowe?

### **1.4 CONCLUSION**

It is obvious that we can go on and on talking on the transformation of the African American and African American literature and what these mean to the American civilisation. It is, however,

important to note that the African American transformed both himself and his literature because he resisted the existing ideology and radically sought after change.

## **1.5 SUMMARY**

In summary, this unit has not just brought to you the African American as he has been and has now become, but has given you a general idea of the literature of this changing person.

## **1.6 TUTOR MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss, in not more than 1000 words, how African American history is connected to the African American literature. The assignment should be typed on A4, Times New Roman, font size 12, and 1.5 spacing. Submit the essay to your tutor for grading.

## **1.7 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

America's Historical Documents. (October 8, 2013). 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery. Accessed from <http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/doc-content/images/13th-amendment.pdf>.

Andrews, W., Foster, F., and Harris, T. (Eds.). (1997). *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Oxford: OUP.

Dasyuva, Ademola O. & Jegede, Oluwatoyin B. (2005). *Studies in Poetry*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.

McKay, Nellie Y. and Gates, Henry Lewis, Jr. (Eds.). (2004). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2nd Ed.). New York: W. W. Norton.

Weider History Group. (October 8, 2013). *Abolitionist Movement*. Accessed from <http://www.historynet.com/abolitionist-movement>.

Horton, James Oliver, and Horton, Lois E. (2008). "African American History." Microsoft® Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.

## **UNIT 2 CHARACTERISTICS AND THEMES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

### **CONTENTS**

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Main Contents
  - 2.3.1 Characteristics of African American Literature
  - 2.3.2 Themes in African American Literature
- 2.4 Conclusion
- 2.5 Summary
- 2.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 2.7 References/Further Readings

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Having familiarised ourselves with the African Americans and their literature, this unit aims at teasing out the characteristics (what makes a text African American) and themes (the subjects of concern) in the African American literature.

### **2.2 OBJECTIVES**

The unit's objectives are: to

- a. chart the pointers for identifying African American literature; and
- b. examine the thematic preoccupations of this literature

### **2.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

#### **2.3.1 Characteristics of African American Literature**

How do we know African American literature? What do we see in a literary piece that tells us it is African American?

The key things to consider in locating the features/characteristics of African American literature include: authorship, experiences covered or subject matter addressed by a text, setting, style and techniques.

*Authorship:* African American literature is usually written by African Americans, and occasionally by non-African Americans, on/about African American experiences.

*Experiences/Subject Matter:* African American literature dwells on African American heritage, the lives of African Americans, the events of history that have shaped their lives, how these events have been accepted/rejectedd or interpreted by both the African American and non-African American, and how African Americans live and relate with non-African Americans and vice-versa.

*Setting:* African American literature is usually set in America, and when it is not, it explores the lives of African Americans in other places.

*Style and Technique:* Because African American literature grew out of the oral tradition of storytelling, work songs of slaves on plantations and spirituals, these verbal modes still have a great deal of traceable impact in the literature. In other words, African American literature leans a lot on verbal modes or oral traditions.

G. Smitherman (1994:80-101) has the following as the formal characteristics of African American literature:

1. Rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language. Example: "Darkness is like a cage in black around me, shutting me off from the rest of the world."
2. Reference to color-race-ethnicity (that is, when topic does not call for it). *Example:* "I don't get in trouble at school or have any problems with people picking on me. I am nice to everyone no matter what color or sex."
3. Use of proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses. *Example:* "People might have shut me off from the world 'cause of a mistake, crime, or a sin.... Judge not others, for you to will have your day to be judge."
4. Sermonic tone reminiscent of traditional Black Church rhetoric, especially in vocabulary, images, metaphor. *Example:* "I feel like I'm suffering from being with world. There no lights, food, water, bed and clothes for me to put on. Im fighten, scared of what might happened if no one finds me. But I pray and pray until they do find me."



5. Direct address-conversational tone. *Example:* “I think you should use the money for the railroad track.... it could fall off the tracks and kill someone on the train. And that is very dangerous. Don’t you think so. Please change your mind and pick the railroad tracks. For the People safety O.K.” [From letter writing persuasive task.]
6. Cultural references. *Example:* “How about slipping me some chitterlings in tonite.”
7. Ethnolinguistic idioms. *Example:* “...a fight has broke loose”; “It would run me crazy....”
8. Verbal inventiveness, unique nomenclature. *Example:* “[The settlers] were pioneerific”; “[The box] has an eye look-out.”
9. Cultural values-community consciousness. Expressions of concern for development of African Americans, concern for welfare of entire community, not just individuals, as for example several essays in which students expressed the view that recreational facilities would have to be for everybody, “young and old, and the homeless among Blacks.”
10. Field dependence. Involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomena; lack of distance from topics and subjects.

### 2.3.2 Themes in African American Literature

Since writers do not write in a vacuum but harvest materials for their works from their environment and experiences, the kinds of theme one finds in African American literature are not surprising, taking a look at the history of the Black in America.

Dasylyva and Jegede (2005) summarise the themes in African American literature as “a passionate concern for race and identity, nationhood and dignity, self-integration and self-assertion and a general *quest* for roots and freedom stemming from the physical and psychological dislocation which slavery had caused” (191). In these themes are seen writers efforts to preserve, explain and make sense of history. Tsaaio (1998) expands these themes further: “race differentia and tension, political domination and marginalisation, economic exploitation and alienation, oppression and cultural deracination and the quest for roots which results, inevitably, in an epiphanic homecoming” (1). The idea of African American writers’ inability to escape from their past or present is also embedded in this submission.

From the above, key themes arise which we will, one by one, look closely at: slavery, racial discrimination, alienation, quest for roots, African American culture, black nationalism,

*Slavery*: A great part of the dignity we enjoy as humans comes from our freedom. The moment we become objectified, our sense of worth is hampered. The instance blacks were sold into slavery, their worth and value in the eyes of investors in slave trade became those of goods/property to be sold, bought, owned and treated as the owner deemed fit. This being the case, slaves were subjected to inhuman treatments. Slavery in American history is documented by many websites, in many books on blacks in America. “Slavery in America” records:

Slavery in America began when the first African slaves were brought to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco. Slavery was practiced throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and African American slaves helped build the economic foundations of the new nation. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 solidified the central importance of slavery to the South’s economy. By the mid-19th century, America’s westward expansion, along with a growing abolition movement in the North, would provoke a great debate over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody American Civil War (1861-65). Though the Union victory freed the nation’s 4 million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued to influence American history, from the tumultuous years of Reconstruction (1865-77) to the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1960s, a century after emancipation. (“Slavery in America”, n.p)

When facts are dropped like this, one may not see the experiences accompanying them. The slaves suffered in every area of their lives, having to master the art of having two faces – the one that remains silent and unconcerned in the presence of the slaver, and the other face that embodies all the sufferings of the black: the disintegration of families (being constantly resold by their owners), sexual abuse of the female slaves by their owners (many times with the knowledge of their black helpless husbands who would lose their lives if they intervened), reckless killing by their masters or other whites for minor offences or just for sport and the show of total control over the life of a black, and mistrust engendered by the stratification among them occasioned by the different duties they performed on the farms and plantations – the house servants were considered of a higher quality than the skilled artisans and lastly, the farm hands. The list of evils

can go on. The period of slavery was indeed a horrible time for the African American and their literature has, in many ways, captured this through biographies, autobiographies and fictional works. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is a good example.

*Racial Discrimination:* While it might be argued that it is a human tendency for people to seek alignment with their kind, it has to be established that this alignment must not translate into hatred or dislike for people outside one's kind or group. When this exclusion is accompanied by unpleasant emotions, there is a problem. Also, when the exclusion is based on the colour of the skin, we are dealing with racial discrimination. African Americans faced a lot of marginalisation and ill-treatment as a result of their difference in colour. The cases of the hatred of the whites for blacks demonstrated by the actions of slave owners on their black slaves, the denial of human and civil rights to the African American, the segregation policies that fuelled the rights movements, and the Ku Klux Klan's actions are few examples. Racial discrimination forms a key concern in African American writings as Martin Luther King (Jr.)'s "I Have a Dream" and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* show.

*Alienation:* This refers to the separation, disconnection or estrangement resulting from hostility which the blacks experienced and, to some degree, are still experiencing. We are all familiar with the human need to be a part of something, to want to be wanted. When we do not have it, the tendency is for us to draw back into ourselves, having at the back of our minds that it is safer and better to be on our own than to meddle where we are not wanted. A classic example is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

*Quest for Roots:* This comes as a result of disconnection. Having been made to feel unwanted and knowing their history of slavery, it is only natural for African Americans to want to find out and know where they came from. Although this may not be possible for them to do (going by the fact that slave traders and owners changed the names of their slaves to ensure the slaves' anonymity and make it impossible for them to establish a connection with their home countries), African American literature is replete with the longings and search for a place to call home. This place in some of the works may not necessarily be the home (African) country. But, there is a reaching out to Africa couched in the writers' desire to have a contact with the continent

generally as their home. Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* exemplifies the quest for roots as a theme in African American literature.

*African American Culture:* The way of life of the African American is represented in his literature in a way that calls attention to it as a key focus. In a way, one can say that one of the aims of the writers is to define the African American and present him to the world as he sees himself and not as the world would like to define him. To achieve this, African American writers give elaborate details on their culture and lifestyle.

*Black Nationalism:* The promotion of the black spirit, culture and belongingness and patriotism to the black community (nation), as well as aspirations for freedom of the black race and expression of the dignity of the black person are at the base of Black Nationalism in America. This is the spirit behind the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, Black Art or Black Power.

## **2.4 CONCLUSION**

Going by its themes, African American literature is closely tied to the African American history. It becomes easy to say that one only needs to know a people's history to arrive at the themes of their literature.

## **2.5 SUMMARY**

This unit has given you pointers to identifying works that can be called African American literature. It has also taken you through some of the overriding ideas and major thrusts of African American literature.

## **2.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

In your own words, how would you identify African American literature? Briefly discuss two themes of African American literature and how these themes capture the people's experience. This assignment should not be more than four (4) pages. It should be typed on A4, Times New Roman, font size 12, and 1.5 spacing. Submit the essay to your tutor for grading.

## 2.7 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

Dasyilva, Ademola O. & Jegede, Oluwatoyin B. (2005). *Studies in Poetry*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.

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## **UNIT 3      ORAL TRADITIONS**

### **CONTENTS**

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Objectives

3.3 Main Contents

3.3.1 Oracy: The Genesis of African American Literature

3.3.2 The Influence of Oral Traditions on African American Literature

3.4 Conclusion

3.5 Summary

3.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment

3.7 References/Further Readings

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

You saw in Unit 2 that African American literature grew out of the people's oral traditions. An in-depth study of these traditions becomes imperative. The knowledge of the roots of this literature will definitely help us to appreciate the 'tree'.

### **3.2 OBJECTIVES**

The unit's objectives are to:

- a. identify the oral tradition of storytelling, plantation work songs, and spirituals; and
- b. trace the impact of these oral traditions in African American literature.

### **3.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

#### **3.3.1 Oracy: The Genesis of African American Literature**

Of interest, in this section, are the oral tradition of storytelling, plantation work songs, spirituals and Black English. In every culture and society, oracy precedes literacy. Thus, it should not be strange that African American literature traces its roots to oracy and oral forms of literature

which are still traceable in the literature today. Also of importance is the fact that in the era of slavery, slave owners did not permit their slaves access to books and writing materials (a measure to ensure that they stayed enslaved without the liberation that education/books will give them). This means that oracy and oral literature became the primary and persisting literature among African Americans. On the plantations, the slaves had various work songs to keep them going while they worked. These work songs mostly utilised the call-and-response pattern where the song leader called out and the workers responded. Stories also were shared among the slaves, and of course, humans are always in the business of telling stories and retelling their experiences to others in order to preserve memories or generate a body/library of shared experiences. These oral literatures – songs and stories – preserved the experiences and culture of the African American till they could put them down in writing. Even with the acquisition of literacy, the orality which has been engrained in the literature still persists.

J. Nandwa and A. Bukenya define oral literature as: “Those utterances whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression” (1983:1). Taban Lo Liyong describes it as: “The cultural information and values transmitted mainly by the spoken word and received by the ear and responded to by the whole organism in societies where writing was not yet the order of the day” (1975:vi). He gives their forms as: “folk tales, legends, myths, beliefs, songs, poems, proverbs, tongue twisters, puns, travelers’ tales, council discussions, traditions, ceremonial activities, and all other ways of imparting group knowledge to the young and new members” (1975:vi). These definitions of oral literature seem not to take non-verbal attributes of oral literature like arts, costumes, craft, etc., into consideration. These also make up oral literature. Again, Lo Liyong’s inclusion of “council discussions” and “all other ways of imparting group knowledge to the young and new members” as parts of oral literature remains questionable. If these lack artistry and creativity, there is no basis for their being regarded as literature, but they are accommodated under oral traditions.

Worthy of note, and of equal importance as oral literature, is the African American English called the Black Folks’ English or Black English. This is the variation of English spoken amongst the blacks which evolved as a unifying second language to African slaves with different mother tongues from different parts of Africa. These slaves had to communicate with their

owners and among themselves; hence the need for a new language which, as a result of their lack of formal education, was not standard American English. The uniqueness of this variation is seen in the slangy expressions that enrich it, the racy speech, and the elliptical nature of the words. Magdaléna Hájková (2005) says this in her study on speech event patterns in Black English (African American English/AAE):

Call and response represents the basic model of interaction between many African Americans and therefore can be heard in streets as well as in churches. Almost all speech events in AAE follow the pattern. The exchanges may lead to a great amusement on one hand, on the other they can bring down a sensitive person who has no idea about their rules. Most visible in the dozens but characteristics of all mentioned types, the interaction between speaker and listener and the listener's feedback are very important. Here is a list of the most frequent speech events with a short explanation.

1. *Playing the dozens* can be simply described as a mean game. It is a set of exchanges where the speakers are trying to bear down each other by criticizing him but mostly his family. The statements are exaggerated which implies that they cannot be true and should not therefore hurt the person to whom they are delivered. Nevertheless, playing the dozens with somebody outside a group of 'buddies' can come to blows. Sometimes signifying is supposed to be a 'lighter' version of playing the dozens, because it presupposes the speakers themselves to be the only aim of verbal attacks, family and friends are excluded.
2. *Rapping* is described as a stylized speech; examples are easy to find in popular songs, in particular in the 'branches' of music like rap, hip hop and r&b.
3. *Loud-talking* can be immensely rude if a partner does not know its rules. It is the situation, when someone says a line that was allotted to somebody else loud enough to be heard by people outside the original conversation.
4. *Toasts* are performed when someone wants to render homage to somebody, they are usually narrated in the first person singular, and the lines are prepared beforehand and include a hero and his brave achievements. (11)

All these oral forms find their way into African American literature with the effect that reading this literature either reminds one of the pre-literate era or gives one the feeling of being caught in the middle of an oral exchange.

### **3.3.2 The Influence of Oral Traditions on African American Literature**

If African American literature grew from oral tradition, it cannot be expected to have outgrown it to the point that oral tradition contributes nothing to the literature. From the discussion in 3.1, it is obvious that African American writers make concerted efforts to imbue their writings with oral



effects. These writers are fully aware of the differences between spoken and written forms but insist on interjecting the written with the spoken form. At the heart of this practice are the preservation of culture and history, and identity construction.

By forcing the world to read the oral forms and orality embedded in African American literature, the writers are ensuring that their history is not wiped out, that their speech patterns are preserved, that what life as an African American means is retained in the experiences documented and that the African American has become a race unique and different from the American. The orality present in African American literature distinguishes it from American literature and, in fact, all other world literatures. Many critics are of the opinion that African traditions are present in African American literature, having been transported into it through oracy. This has some weight, bearing in mind that the slaves were from different parts of Africa. However, it has to be said that these traditions over time evolved to be something which can be identified as a separate entity. Also, going by the efforts made during the slave trade to ensure that slaves from the same location do not end up in the same household, it is difficult for a particular African tradition to have developed in a place. Instead, what happened is that different individuals with different backgrounds came together, rubbed off their differences on one another and formed something entirely new – the African American culture. In essence, what one sees are different shades of Africa transformed and adjusted to fit into a new environment. However, critics like Ken Warren believe that claims of the presence of African traditions in African American literature should be viewed as “symptoms of the breakdown of a former coherence” (8). This is because he sees African American literature as that which has been given birth by the “assumptions and practices of the segregation era” (8). One thing is clear: if Warren is right, he fails to recognise that the tool in African American literature for fighting segregation is the promotion and eulogising of those qualities that made the African American different from the whites which are found in the traditions and practices that are not American (and are therefore African).

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

African American literature, to a great extent, has been enriched by oral traditions and oracy. Therefore, an understanding of what obtains in the people’s oral traditions goes a long way in the

appreciation of the literature. A lot of the flavour and uniqueness attributed to African American literature is a result of the oral presence it embraces.

### **3.5 SUMMARY**

This unit has made efforts to take us through the oral traditions of storytelling, plantation work songs, spirituals and Black English. It has also looked into how these and orality in general come to bear on African American literature.

### **3.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

In which particular ways have oral traditions influenced African American literature? Your essay should not be more than 1000 words. It should be typed on A4, Times New Roman, font size 12, and 1.5 spacing. Submit the essay to your tutor for grading.

### **3.7 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS**

Liyong, Taban Lo. (ed.) (1972). *Popular Culture of East Africa*. Nairobi: Longman Kenya.

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Warren, Ken. (2010). *What Was African American Literature*. Web. Accessed on 9 Sept. 2013.

## **MODULE TWO**

## **HISTORY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

The grounding act of African American literature is often said to be slavery. This is so in the sense that slavery caused the Negroes' initial documentation culturally and socially in America. Early African American writers were all products of the slavery experience, so it could be said, by extension, that slavery is responsible for the emergence of African American literature. When we consider that majority of blacks in America (at the origins of African American literature) got there through slavery, it becomes obvious that the experience is key and cannot be downplayed in the study of African American literature. This provides a link to the symbiotic study of history and literature.

This module is divided into the following five units:

Unit 1: Early African American Literature

Unit 2: Slave narratives and Spirituals

Unit 3: Post-slavery Era

Unit 4: Harlem Renaissance

Unit 5: Civil Rights Movement and Black Art/ Black Power Era

Each of the units focuses on a period in the history of African American literature.

## **UNIT 1: EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2.1 Objectives
- 1.3 Main Contents
  - 1.3.1 History: Early African American literature
  - 1.3.2 Early African American Writers
- 1.4 Conclusion
- 1.5 Summary
- 1.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 1.7 References/Further Reading

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

History, according to Hugh Grant (Hugh Web), is a text. It is a text not of what has happened but of what is seen as having happened. African American literature in this sense responds to its historical context. From a peep into this rich literary landscape, one is forced to see the very nature of the writing, that historical context has also consciously created and methodically produced. To this end, Grant would say that what is at stake is a dialectics of response and literary significations. As we would see eventually, the history of African American literature, as it were, is unique, and the really striking thing is the response to it which makes its production univocal in nature. The defining lines of this literary enterprise are clear enough. So also is the definition of its outstanding features which include its ideological consideration and the achievement of freedom and authenticity. True to its origin, African American literature projected itself into being by an over-masking and exploiting hand of slavery. Ante-bellum literature, according to Braithwaite (1925), “imposed the distortions of moralistic controversy and made the Negro wax-figure of the market place” while the post-bellum literature “retaliated with the condescending reactions of sentiment and caricature and made the negro a genre of stereotype”. But what is glaring is that the Negro was already a part and parcel of American

literature generations before he was part of it as a creator. James Weldon Johnson buttressed this point in one of his poems with lines such as:

O black and unknown bards of long ago,  
How come your lips touch the sacred fire?...  
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise,  
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

## **1.2 OBJECTIVES**

This unit's objectives are to:

- a. examine the vast array of prose, poetry, and drama that make up much of early African American literature;
- b. provide the opportunity to explore the diverse features of this literature;
- c. investigate the ever-evolving issues involved in defining the African American literary canon;
- d. encourage the reading of literature with a fine critical understanding and aesthetic appreciation that an undergraduate course should provide;
- e. give a brief history of what African American literature is like;
- f. give an overview of the early players of this literature;
- g. explore the basic tenets of this peculiar writing; and
- h. examine different writers according to their contributions to the canon.

## **1.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

### **1.3.1 History: Early African American literature**

The aim of this course is to give an introduction to the major African American writers. The United States of America declared independence from Great Britain in 1776. Between then and the outbreak of the civil war in 1861, African American literature established its own identity and achieved something of a golden period in the years immediately prior to the war. African

American literature could be logically set on English literature courses, but culturally because of its unique African contents, one could say convincingly that it is different from that of Europe. What we see today as African American history predates the emergence of the United States as an independent country, and African American literature has its root deep in this history.

In essence, the history of African American literature is what Van Wyck Brooks (1952) would probably call the story of its *makers and finders*. It is the history of those responsible for creating an African American literature and those who provide meaning and understanding to the creative process. It is the story of a literature coming of age in search of a definition and affirmation.

Extending many centuries from Africa through slavery, oral tradition to literary expression of a new millennium, it is both a reflection and representation of what is in the past, present; from exploitation and dehumanisation to freedom and assessment of 'self'; from rebellion and the whip to growth and maturity; from racial discrimination to acceptance; from loss of identity to sharing of dual identities of dual consciousness. Most importantly, it is the story of the African American author shaping the scope and perception of his/her American presence, purpose and identity. African American literature has always sought to record deeds and events so that others would acknowledge, share and appreciate its experience.

With the infusion of the narrative voice, the telling of the story itself is enhanced with depth, personality and artistry of the story-teller/writer whom we see to have gained in both experience and importance. However, inherent within the making of African American literature is the sense of place –from the Africa through the slave ship and the middle passage to a new world of uncertainties, what one sees is the forging of a new personality, a new consciousness, a new mentality that is shaping the totality of a people today. Consequently, what is produced reveals

places, both real and imagined; characters both real and imagined; plots both real and imagined; and all have come together to give credence to what is known today as African American literature. The study of this literature details the lives and works of its makers; therefore it finds the means by which to digest and appreciate its importance. It is the study of genres and forms, trends and movements. It is the study worth looking at no matter the theory used.

It is the study of a literature maturing from its infancy to an enviable place today. Literature is said to be one that reflects the multiplicity of a people united by a common bond and diversified by all other elements, but this literature is seeking to provide insight and understanding to the quality of life and the reality of existence in society. The African American writer is in this stead expanding the boundaries of human depth and perception to bring home varying experiences. S/he is seen to keep on broadening the underlying prospect of heritage.

### **1.3.2 Early African American Writers**

As far as we can tell, Lucy Terry's work is the first known piece of African American literature titled "Bars Fight". The poem is said to have been written in 1746 but was not published until 1855. Phillis Wheatley (1753–84) also published her poetic verses on several issues in 1773, three years before the American independence. Wheatley was born in Africa; she was captured and taken to the New World at the tender age of seven. At sixteen, she discovered she could comfortably use her new language of English and she wrote poetry that was praised by many of the leading persons of the American Revolution, including George Washington, who personally thanked her for a poem written in his honour. Some found it difficult to take that a Black woman wrote such beautiful poetry.

Phyllis Wheatley was the first published African American poet and first African American woman whose writings helped create the genre of African American literature. Born in Gambia, she was made a slave at the age of seven. She was purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston, who taught her to read and write, and helped encourage her poetry. Wheatley also toured England and was praised in a poem by fellow African American poet, Jupiter Hammon. Wheatley was emancipated by her owners after her poetic success.

### **An Hymn to Humanity by Phyllis Wheatley**

I.

Lo! for this dark terrestrial ball  
Forsakes his azure-paved hall  
A prince of heav'nly birth!  
Divine Humanity behold,  
What wonders rise, what charms unfold  
At his descent to earth!

II.

The bosoms of the great and good  
With wonder and delight he view'd,  
And fix'd his empire there:  
Him, close compressing to his breast,  
The sire of gods and men address'd,  
"My son, my heav'nly fair!

III.

"Descend to earth, there place thy throne;  
"To succour man's afflicted son  
"Each human heart inspire:  
"To act in bounties unconfin'd  
"Enlarge the close contracted mind,  
"And fill it with thy fire."

IV.

Quick as the word, with swift career  
He wings his course from star to star,



And leaves the bright abode.  
The Virtue did his charms impart;  
Their G-----! then thy raptur'd heart  
Perceiv'd the rushing God:

V.

For when thy pitying eye did see  
The languid muse in low degree,  
Then, then at thy desire  
Descended the celestial nine;  
O'er me methought they deign'd to shine,  
And deign'd to string my lyre.

VI.

Can Afric's muse forgetful prove?  
Or can such friendship fail to move  
A tender human heart?  
Immortal Friendship laurel-crown'd  
The smiling Graces all surround  
With ev'ry heav'nly Art.

**'A Farewel To America to Mrs. S. W.' By Phillis Wheatley**

I.

ADIEU, New-England's smiling meads,  
Adieu, the flow'ry plain:  
I leave thine op'ning charms, O spring,  
And tempt the roaring main.

II.

In vain for me the flow'rets rise,  
And boast their gaudy pride,  
While here beneath the northern skies  
I mourn for health deny'd.

III.

Celestial maid of rosy hue,  
O let me feel thy reign!  
I languish till thy face I view,  
Thy vanish'd joys regain.

IV.

Susanna mourns, nor can I bear

To see the crystal show'r,  
Or mark the tender falling tear  
At sad departure's hour;

V.  
Not unregarding can I see  
Her soul with grief opprest:  
But let no sighs, no groans for me,  
Steal from her pensive breast.

VI.  
In vain the feather'd warblers sing,  
In vain the garden blooms,  
And on the bosom of the spring  
Breathes out her sweet perfumes.

VII.  
While for Britannia's distant shore  
We sweep the liquid plain,  
And with astonish'd eyes explore  
The wide-extended main.

VIII.  
Lo! Health appears! celestial dame!  
Complacent and serene,  
With Hebe's mantle o'er her Frame,  
With soul-delighting mein.

IX.  
To mark the vale where London lies  
With misty vapours crown'd,  
Which cloud Aurora's thousand dyes,  
And veil her charms around.

X.  
Why, Phoebus, moves thy car so slow?  
So slow thy rising ray?  
Give us the famous town to view,  
Thou glorious king of day!

XI.  
For thee, Britannia, I resign  
New-England's smiling fields;  
To view again her charms divine,

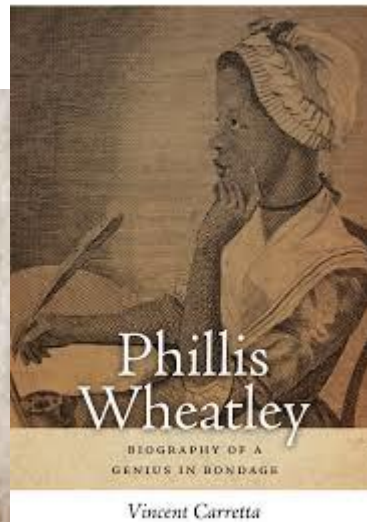
What joy the prospect yields!

XII.

But thou! Temptation hence away,  
With all thy fatal train,  
Nor once seduce my soul away,  
By thine enchanting strain.

XIII.

Thrice happy they, whose heav'nly shield  
Secures their souls from harms,  
And fell Temptation on the field  
Of all its pow'r disarms!



Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806?) was another early African American writer. He published his poem, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" in 1761. He wrote an ode to Phillis Wheatley, in which he dwells on their shared humanity and common bonds.

Writing at the age of 76 after a lifetime of slavery, Hammon said, "If we should ever get to Heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black, or for being slaves" (*The New*

*Negro*, 1927:232). He dwells on a gradual emancipation of blacks as a way of ending slavery.

Hammon is said to have remained a slave till his death.

**‘An Address to Miss Phyllis Wheatly’ by Jupiter Hammon**

O, come you pious youth: adore  
The wisdom of thy God.  
In bringing thee from distant shore,  
To learn His holy word.

Thou mightst been left behind,  
Amidst a dark abode;  
God's tender Mercy still combin'd,  
Thou hast the holy word.

Fair wisdom's ways are paths of peace,  
And they that walk therein,  
Shall reap the joys that never cease,  
And Christ shall be their king.

God's tender mercy brought thee here,  
tost o'er the raging main;  
In Christian faith thou hast a share,  
Worth all the gold of Spain.

While thousands tossed by the sea,  
And others settled down,  
God's tender mercy set thee free,  
From dangers still unknown.

That thou a pattern still might be,  
To youth of Boston town,  
The blessed Jesus thee free,  
From every sinful wound.

The blessed Jesus, who came down,  
Unveil'd his sacred face,

To cleanse the soul of every wound,  
And give repenting grace.

That we poor sinners may obtain  
The pardon of our sin;  
Dear blessed Jesus now constrain,  
And bring us flocking in.

Come you, Phillis, now aspire,  
And seek the living God,  
So step by step thou mayst go higher,  
Till perfect in the word.

While thousands mov'd to distant shore,  
And others left behind,  
The blessed Jesus still adore,  
Implant this in thy mind.

Thou hast left the heathen shore;  
Thro' mercy of the Lord,  
Among the heathen live no more,  
Come magnify thy God.

I pray the living God may be,  
The sheperd of thy soul;  
His tender mercies still are free,  
His mysteries to unfold.

Thou, Phillis, when thou hunger hast,  
Or pantest for thy God;  
Jesus Christ is thy relief,  
Thou hast the holy word.

The bounteous mercies of the Lord,  
Are hid beyond the sky,  
And holy souls that love His word,  
Shall taste them when they die.

These bounteous mercies are from God,  
The merits of his Son;

The humble soul that loves his word,  
He chooses for his own.

Come, dear Phillis, be advis'd,  
To drink Samaria's flood;  
There nothing is that shall suffice,  
But Christ's redeeming blood.

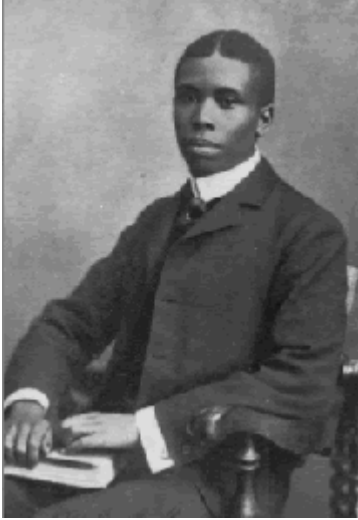
When thousands muse with earthly toys,  
And range about the street,  
Dear Phillis, seek for heaven's joys,  
Where we do hope to meet.

When God shall send His summons down,  
And number saints together.  
Blest angels chant, (triumphant sound)  
Come live with me forever.

The humble soul shall fly to God,  
And leave the things of time,  
Start forth as 'twere at the first word,  
To taste things more divine.

Behold! the soul shall waft away,  
Whene'er we come to die,  
And leave this cottage made of clay,  
In twinkling of an eye.

Now glory be to the Most High,  
United praises given,  
By all on earth, incessantly,  
And all the host of heav'n.



Jupiter Hammon

There is also a man named Victor Sejour, born in 1817. He is credited to have written what is known as the earliest works of fiction in the African American canon. Sejour was born free in New Orleans but moved to France at the age of nineteen where he published a short story written in French and titled originally as *Le Mulatre* that is, *The Mulatto*.

The mulatto opened his eyes; and his first impulse was to smile at the sight of his beloved. Zelia recounted for him everything that had happened. He didn't want to believe it, but soon he was convinced of his misfortune; for some men entered his hut and tied up his wife while she stood sobbing. . . . Georges made an effort to rise up; but, still weakened, he fell back onto his bed, his eyes haggard, his hands clenched, his mouth gasping for air. From *The Mulatto* by Victor Sejour. (1837)

William Wells Brown was another novelist in the category of abolitionist campaigner. He was born into slavery but escaped slavery to work for the abolitionists. Brown's famous *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853) is seen as the first novel written by an African American. It was based on the rumour that President Thomas Jefferson had a daughter with his slave named Sally Hemings. This represents a classic of what the abolitionists' campaign was all about – the abuse

and dehumanisation of the black folks. Harriet Wilson wrote *Our Nig* in 1859 which expresses the difficulties of black lives in the northern part of the country where blacks were supposedly free.

#### **1.4 CONCLUSION**

The responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him. (James Baldwin)

While African American literature is well accepted in the United States, there are numerous views on its significance, traditions, and theories. To the genre's supporters, African American literature arose out of the experience of Blacks in the United States, especially with regards to historic racism and discrimination, and is an attempt to refute the dominant culture's literature and power. In addition, supporters see the literature existing both within and outside American literature and as helping to revitalise the country's writing.

To critics, on the other hand, African American literature is part and parcel of American literature. In addition, there are some within the African American community who do not like how their own literature sometimes showcases Black people, but their stories must be told all the same.

Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subjected to racist attitudes. Their experience inspired some blacks all over the world, particularly writers, at least during the early years of African American literature, to prove they were the equals of European American authors. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to the fairness of describing the



subtext of the history of black letters, there is the urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture.

Refuting the claims of the dominant culture is not all that African American writers did by proving their worth; they were also attempting to subvert the literary and power traditions of the United States. Most of the scholars expressing this view assert that writing has traditionally been seen as something defined by the dominant culture as a white male activity. This means that, in American society, literary acceptance must be tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the African Diaspora, African American literature is said to have broken the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power. This view of African American literature as a tool in the struggle for Black political and cultural liberation is seen from the point of view of the famous W. E. B. Du Bois.

## **1.5 SUMMARY**

African American literature, according to Joanne Gabbin (cited by Angela K. Brown, 2013:109), exists both inside and outside American literature. “Somehow African American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part”, she says.

This view of African American literature is grounded in the experience of Black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of United States history, they were not accepted as full citizens and were actively discriminated against. As a result, they were part of America while also outside it.

While African American literature exists fully within the framework of a larger American literature, it also exists as its own entity. For this reason, new styles of storytelling and unique voices are created in isolation. The benefit of this, according to McKay (2004), is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalise the larger literary world. This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the Black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalising American culture. Hence, one sees that African American literature is a unique creation of African Americans themselves owing its richness to the experience of slavery and racism.

## **1.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- Attempt a documentation of the multiplicity of African American identities.
- Examine the renewed interest in the history of the African American as well as the literature in relation to their psychological and spiritual lives during slavery and segregation.
- Explore the influence of African American literary scholarship as part of the literary canon of the United States of America.

## **1.7 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 2: SLAVE NARRATIVES – AN AMERICAN GENRE**

### **CONTENTS**

2.1 Introduction: Slave Narratives

2.2 Objectives

2.3 Main Contents

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2.3.2 Purposes of Slave Narrative

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2.3.4 Reasons for the Popularity of Slave Narratives

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2.3.7 Motifs of Slave Narrative

2.3.8 Slave Narratives as Tales of Religious Redemption

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2.3.11 African American Spirituals and Their Roots in Liberation Motif

2.3.12 The Negro Spiritual

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2.5 Summary

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### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

#### **Slave Narratives**

To every realm shall peace her charms display.  
And heavenly freedom spread her ray. (Phillis Wheatley)

Wherever human slavery exists, the slaves themselves tend to revisit their bondage. Hence, one would understand why the slave experience is a major subject of the early African American writing. Slaves had developed early enough the capacity for concealing their true feelings about slavery from their masters, but they express their outrage and contempt for the institution of slavery through their songs and spirituals. During the long years of slavery, many free slaves turned to their local churches and publication to provide them with a sense of community and a measure of hope.

This writing, however, developed from oral tradition and this act of writing is equated with the quest for freedom, just like learning is generally linked with freedom because it is believed that this is a gateway to eternal redemption. Slave narrative is a special genre peculiar to African American literature. Narratives of slavery recounted the personal experiences of ante-bellum African Americans who had escaped from slavery and found their way to safety in the North. The narratives are personal histories and experiences of ex-slaves or run-away slaves about slavery. These narratives are essentially dedicated to freedom, and they expose the evils of the slave institution.

## **2.2 OBJECTIVES**

This unit's objectives are to:

- a. discuss the origin of slave narratives;
- b. give an overview of the early players of this genre;
- c. explore the basic tenets of this peculiar writing;
- d. examine the different forms of slave narratives; and
- e. investigate the importance of this genre to the African American canon.

## **2.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

Slave narrative is an essential part of the anti-slavery movement; the narratives drew on Biblical allusion and imagery, the rhetoric of abolitionism, the traditions of the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography in appealing to their (often white) audiences. These narratives, both ante-

bellum and post ante-bellum, were basically appeals from ex-slaves to white audience, and they were meant to arouse the sympathy of the white audience stressing the evils of slavery. Some of these narratives bore a "frame" or preface attesting to their authenticity and to the sufferings described within.

According to William Andrews, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, autobiographies of former slaves dominated the African American narrative tradition. Approximately sixty-five American slave narratives were published in book or pamphlet form before 1865.

The slave narrative took on its classic form and tone between 1840 and 1860, when the Romantic Movement in American literature was in its most influential phase. Frederick Douglass's celebration of selfhood in his 1845 Narrative might easily be read as a black contribution to the literature of romantic individualism and anti-institutionalism. Ten years later, Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, deconstructs his 1845 self-portrait with typical romantic irony. Briton Hammon in his narrative (1760) dwells on how he had escaped slavery; he also delves into how he returned to it after twelve years of freedom because he fared better being a slave than being killed by the savage Indians. The ante-bellum slave narrative was the product of fugitive bondmen who rejected the authority of their masters and their socialization as slaves and broke away, often violently, from slavery. Fredrick Douglass did not believe that Hammon's return is a better option as he feels he is better dead than alive and in bondage.

Through an emphasis on slavery as deprivation--buttressed by extensive evidence of a lack of adequate food, clothing, and shelter; the denial of basic familial rights; the enforced ignorance of

most religious or moral precepts; and so on--the ante-bellum narrative pictures the South's "peculiar institution" as a wholesale assault on everything precious to humankind because under slavery, civilisation reverts to a Hobbesian state of nature; it is discovered that if left to its own devices, slavery will pervert master and mistress into monsters, and power-madness will reduce the servant to a nearly helpless object of exploitation and cruelty.

From 1760-1947, more than 200 book-length slave narratives were published in the United States and England and, according to Marion Starling (*The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*, 1982), more than 6,000 are known to exist. In *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (2nd ed., 1994), Frances Smith Foster comments that considering only those narratives written by persons who had been legally enslaved in the United States considerably shrinks the number. In her book, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (1979), she gives a thorough overview of this genre. She states that racism actually started with slavery because whites saw the colour 'black' as a curse and this issue of racism is highly visible in most of these narratives. Smith also gives a clue on the difference in the narratives written by men and women. This trend she refers to as *the problematic of the self in autobiography* (Smith 1979:146).

Houston Baker Jr. in his book, *Figuration for a New American Literary History: Archeology, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) says that economic realities led to different survival strategies for male and female slave narrators. Because of economic hardship, some Negroes devised a way of getting money from abolitionists' rallies. Baker reflected on the narratives of Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and touched on Equiano whose narrative talks about his African past as authentic.

This genre, that is, Slave Narrative, is a popular aspect of the African American literary act which actually started with very pressing social concern and is closely knit with the anti-slavery movement. This genre flourished between 1820 and 1860.

### **2.3.1 Anti-Slavery Poems**

#### **1.**

How long have I in bondage lain,  
And languished to be free!  
Alas! And must I still complain-  
Deprived of liberty.

From 'On Liberty and Slavery' by George Moses Horton

#### **2.**

They are slaves who fear to speak  
For the fallen and the weak....  
They are slaves who dare not be  
In the right with two or three.

From 'Stanzas on Freedom' by James Russell Lowell

#### **3.**

Make me a grave where'er you will,  
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;  
Make it among earth's humblest graves,



But not in a land where men are slaves

From 'Bury Me in a Free Land' by Frances E. W. Harper

**4.**

He did not feel the driver's whip,  
Nor the burning heat of the day;  
For Death had illuminated the Land of Sleep  
And his lifeless body lay  
A worn-out fetter that the soul  
Had broken and thrown away!

From 'The Slave's Dream' by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

**5.**

I am the hounded slave; I wince at the bite of the dogs,  
Hell and despair are upon me; crack and again crack the marksmen,  
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore drips...  
Agonies are one of my changes of garments.  
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels,  
I myself become the wounded person.

From 'Song of Myself' by Walt Whitman

### **2.3.2 Purposes of Slave Narrative**

- It is an attempt to arouse the sympathy of readers in order to promote humanitarianism.
- It emphasises traditional Christian religious ideas.

- It shows acceptance of the ideals of the dominant white society
- It also emphasises the cruelty of individual slave owners.

### **2.3.3 What Influenced Slave Narrators?**

- King James Bible
- New England sermonizing traditions
- Rhetoric and aims of abolitionist orators
- Devotional books like *Pilgrim's Progress*.

### **2.3.4 Reasons for the Popularity of Slave Narratives**

- Vivid scenes of horror and violence that served as an acceptable gratification of the popular appetite for sensationalism of the genre
- Religious influence; that is, its didactic content
- They provide interesting descriptions of life in the South
- They serve more like propaganda weapons during abolition and Civil War.

### **2.3.5 The Narrator of the Slave Narrative**

Typically, the narrator of the Slave Narrative

- is abruptly brought from state of protected innocence to confrontation with the evil of slavery and captivity;
- suffers from forced existence in an alien society;
- is unable to submit or effectively resist;

- balances yearning for freedom against the perils of escape;
- sees his or her condition as a symbol of the suffering condition of all the lowly and oppressed; and
- grows in moral and spiritual strength as a result of suffering and torment.

### 2.3.6 The Pattern of Slave Narratives

From Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, [2nd. ed., 1994]:

The plot of the nineteenth-century slave narrative is informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels. The action moves from the idyllic life of a Garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land. In addition, the plot of the slave narrative incorporates the parallel structure of birth into death and death into birth which also distinguishes the Judeo-Christian myth.

According to Smith, slave narrative as a mythological pattern is realised in four chronological phases. The first phase comes with the loss of innocence, which is objectified through the development of an awareness of what it means to be a slave. This can be compared to the descent from perfection or mortification. The mortification process includes purgation, for as the slave learns the meaning of slavery, he also tries to purge himself of those elements that would facilitate enslavement. The second phase is the realisation of alternatives to bondage and the formulation of a resolve to be free. This decision begins the ascent to the ideal or invigoration. The resolution to quit slavery is, in effect, a climax to a conversion experience. The third phase is the escape. Whether it occurs between two sentences or forms the largest portion of the narrative, it is part of the struggle to overcome evil. The interest at this point is in the details, the

pitfalls and obstacles, the sufferings and moments of bravery encountered in the process of achieving freedom. Although the first attempt sometimes ends in capture, the outcome is never in doubt. The narrative, after all, was written by a freeman.

The fourth phase is that of freedom obtained. It is the arrival at the City of God or the New Jerusalem, and it corresponds to the jubilation period of ancient ritual because there are:

1. Descent from state of innocence or peace into recognition of status (slavery);
2. Progressive dehumanisation at hands of masters and concomitant growth of self-reliance and decision-making, sometimes involving literacy;
3. A spiritual "bottoming-out";
4. Resolve, for Douglass, the fight with Covey; and
5. Flight and redemption.

### **2.3.7 Motifs of Slave Narrative**

- It exposes physical and emotional abuses of slavery: scenes of whipping/leeching, sexual abuse, starvation, especially of women or children.
- It exposes (sometimes satirically) white owners' hypocrisy and inconstancy.
- It describes repeated raising of narrator's expectations only to have them dashed by whites. Dreams were often aborted.
- It describes quest for literacy by slaves.
- It also describes quest for freedom by slaves.
- It includes vignettes of other character types and the experience of slavery: those who succeed and those who fail.
- It makes overt appeals to imagined audience for help.

- It documents loss of significant family member(s) and the destruction of family ties.

### **2.3.8 Slave Narratives as Tales of Religious Redemption**

From the 1770s to the 1820s, the slave narratives generally gave an account of a spiritual journey leading to Christian redemption. The authors usually characterised themselves as Africans rather than slaves. We have *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert 'Ukawsaw Gronniosaw', an African Prince*, by Ukawaw Gronniosaw (1772), and *The Interesting Narrative and the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African* by Olaudah Equaino (1789).

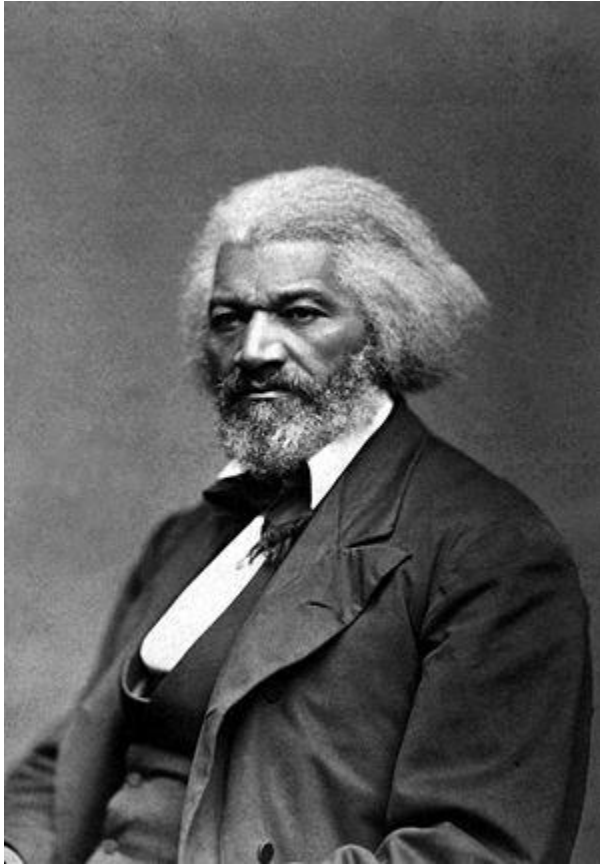
### **2.3.9 Slave Narratives as Tales of Inspiration to the Abolitionist Struggle**

From the mid-1820s, the genre became much more the conscious use of the autobiographical form to generate enthusiasms for the abolitionist struggle. The tales were more literary in form often with the introduction of fictionalised dialogues. It is said that between 1835 and 1865, over 80 such narratives were published. Features of such narratives include: slave auctions, the break-up of families and accounts of escapes with successes and failures. Under this, we have: *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (1825), *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831), and *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* (1836).

### **2.3.10 Slave Narratives that Tell Tales of Progress**

After the defeat of the slave states of the Confederate South, the narratives lost their urgency and were less concerned with conveying the evils of slavery. Thus, in this case, they merely gave a sentimental account of plantation life and end it with the narrator adjusting to their new lives of

freedom. We have narratives such as: *The Life of James Mars, A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* (1864) *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or, Struggles for Freedom* by Lucy Delaney (1892) ‘The Freedman's Story’ by William Parker published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1866) *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* by Louis Hughes (1897) and *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington (1901)



### **Frederick Douglass: One of the First African Americans of Letters**

Frederick Douglass was a strong public speaker and, after escaping from slavery, prominent leader in the abolitionist movement. Douglass also authored several compelling autobiographies that detail his experiences in slavery. He served as a striking counter-example to slaveholders' claims that blacks did not have the intellectual capacity to function as free and independent

citizens. See his work – *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* – for his early life as a slave, his escape from bondage, and his complete history.

### **2.3.11 African American Spirituals and Their Roots in Liberation Motif**

The spirituals, according to Alan Locke (1927:199), are the “most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America”. To him, by the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro “make them at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them”. The spirituals are intuitively emotional, and the humble origin of these sorrowful songs can be ignored or overlooked by scholars of music today because underneath their “broken words, childish imagery, peasant simplicity and a tragic profundity of emotional experience lies the depth of heart-felt experience of deprivation and exploitation” (Locke, 1927:200).

The spirituals, according to Locke (1927:201), are spiritual in the sense that:

Conscious artistry and popular conception alike should never rob them of this heritage; it is untrue to their tradition and to the folk genius to give them another tone. That they are susceptible of both crude and refined secularization is no excuse. Even though their makers worked them up from the ‘shout’ and the rhythmic elements of the sensuous dance, in their finished form and basic emotional effect all of these elements were completely sublimated in the sincere intensities of religious seriousness.

Emotionally, these songs are simple in nature; they address every mood that pervades human consciousness with traditional religious tone. Locke (1927:205) identifies four basic classes of the Negro spirituals:

1. Unrestrained evangelical ‘shouts’
2. Camp-meeting songs
3. Folk ballads form that is so overlaid with tradition of the spirituals

#### 4. The work and labour song with secular character

Moreover, the pure spirituals are traceable to broken fragments of evangelical folk liturgy; they are also linked to confessionals, exhortation, mourning, conversion and love-feast element of the present-day Pentecostal church. The distinctiveness of the spirituals and their overt meanings are found in their musical elements, and this distinctiveness as it were could be melodic, harmonic or rhythmic in nature. According to Krehbiel, cited in Locke (1927:206), “the rhythmic element, though still dominant, has yielded measurably to the melodic, the dance having given way to religious worship, sensual bodily movement to emotional utterance”. What is glaring today is that there is a fusion of all the elements to make a complete whole.

The spirituals contributed immensely to the development of African American literature. The lyrics, the musical elements, merged completely with the verbal elements to create a whole blend. The spiritual represents a kind of poetry of the people in many ways. It grows out of these experiences; it is transmitted from generation to generation just like the old English ballads. It later came down in written form and it is one form of the slave song (apart from the blues), hence, it entered documentary history during the civil war.

The spirituals belong musically to that vast matrix of songs out of the African root and nurtured on American soil. We find songs like: “Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child”; “Go Down Moses”; “Joshua fit de Battle of Jericho”; “Crucifixion”; “Steal Away to Jesus”; “Roll, Jordan Roll”. These are just few of the sorrow, spiritual songs found in African American history.

#### **2.3.12 The Negro Spiritual**

##### **1**

Oh! What Crying



Oh! What Crying  
Oh! What Crying over me  
And before I'd be a slave  
I'd be buried in my grave  
And go home to the Lord  
And be free.

Oh! What Mourning  
Oh! What Mourning  
Oh! What Mourning over me  
And before I'd be a slave  
I'd be buried in my grave  
And go home to my Lord  
And be free.

Oh! What singing  
Oh! What singing  
Oh! What singing over me  
And before I'd be a slave  
I'd be buried in my grave  
And go home to my Lord  
And be free.

## **2. Hold Your Light**

Hold your light, Brudder Robert,-  
Hold your light,  
Hold your light on Canaan's shore.

"What make ole Satan for follow me so?  
Satan ain't got notin' for do wid me.  
Hold your light,  
Hold your light,  
Hold your light on Canaan's shore.

## **3. Room in There**

O, my mudder is gone ! my mudder is gone !  
My mudder is gone into heaven, my Lord !  
I can't stay behind !  
Dere's room in dar, room in dar,  
Room in dar, in de heaven, my Lord !

I can't stay behind,  
Can't stay behind, my dear,  
I can't stay behind !

"O, my fader is gone !" &c.

"O, de angels are gone !" &c.

"O, I 'se been on de road ! I 'se been on de road !  
I 'se been on de road into heaven, my Lord !  
I can't stay behind !  
O, room in dar, room in dar,  
Room in dar, in de heaven, my Lord !  
I can't stay behind !"

#### **4. My Army Cross Over**

My army cross over,  
My army cross over.  
O, Pharaoh's army drowned !  
My army cross over.

"We 'll cross de mighty river,  
My army cross over;  
We 'll cross de river Jordan,  
My army cross over;  
We 'll cross de danger water,  
My army cross over;  
We 'll cross de mighty Myo,  
My army cross over. (*Thrice.*)  
O, Pharaoh's army drowned !  
My army cross over."

#### **5. Ride in, Kind Savior**

"Ride in, kind Saviour !  
No man can hinder me.  
O, Jesus is a mighty man !  
No man, &c.  
We 're marching through Virginny fields.

No man, &c.  
O, Satan is a busy man,  
No Man, &c.  
And he has his sword and shield,  
No man, &c.  
O, old Secesh done come and gone !  
No man can hinder me."

## **6. I Want to Go Home**

"Dere's no rain to wet you,  
O, yes, I want to go home.  
Dere's no sun to burn you,  
O, yes, I want to go home ;  
O, push along, believers,  
O, yes, &c.  
Dere's no hard trials,  
O, yes, &c.  
Dere's no whips a-crackin',  
O, yes, &c.  
My brudder on de wayside,  
O, yes, &c.  
O, push along, my brudder,  
O, yes, &c.  
Where dere's no stormy weather,  
O, yes, &c.  
Dere's no tribulation,  
O, yes, &c."

Almost all the spiritual songs were thoroughly religious in their tone, however quaint their expression, and were in a minor key, both as to words and music. The attitude is always the same, and, as a commentary on the life of the race, the songs are infinitely pathetic. They talk about nothing but patience for this life and nothing but triumph in the next. Sometimes the present predominates; sometimes the future; but the combination is always implied. One thing is

paramount in all the songs; that thing is patience. The next thing is the popularity of these songs, especially during the slave era.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

Self-narratives or autobiographical writings are most common in African American literature, and slavery is mostly said to be responsible for this kind of writing. The slave experience provides a fertile ground for this kind of writing to flourish. There are basically two types of narratives by blacks in America. The initial narratives are confessions or testimonies by ex-slaves collected by whites to be used in the abolitionist campaign; others were narrated to a writer who would then turn it into a pseudo-autobiography. A very good example of this kind of narrative is *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. There are some narratives written by the ex-slaves themselves. Examples abound in American literature.

Crispin Sartwell in *Act Like You Know: African American Autobiography and White Identity* and Jon Woodson in *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance* try to pay attention to how the mimetic impulse in African American letters grew out of this struggle against white fictions. This has greatly enhanced black writing and invariably black canon. Sartwell, is of the opinion that authors as diverse as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Malcolm X, and even rap artist Sister Souljah create truth-telling testimonies that debunk white mythologies of race in their articulation of the particular experiences of the black self.

The autobiographical mode has continued to flourish since the slave period to the present day as a basic instrument for black literary expression. Through this genre, the black author has been able to articulate, define and respond to black experience.

Narratives which translate to autobiography are, according to Albert Stone, a *high culture* and narratives like those of Henry Adams, Lillian Hellman, Gertrude Stein, Fredrick Douglass, Richard Wright and many others are seen today as *American classics*. The venerable life stories according to Stone and their modern counterparts like *The Education of Henry Adams*, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Black Boy* are epitome of the ‘self’ and so are often referred to in major discourses on African American literature today. Slave narrative as a genre of African American literature possesses a canon worthy of comparison with the personal history of any modern literary enterprise.

Slave narrative in essence broke the barrier of literacy and censorship, just like music, to become folk expression. It projects the realities of lives and times of those narrators who dared to hope. Their stories could fall into those Howard Dean Howells referred to as *the most democratic province in the republic of letters*. The exhilarating part of these narratives is their motives and intentions which are created in form of memoirs, histories, reminiscences, apologies, confessionals, testaments, life-histories, non-fictions, mock-autobiographies diaries and journals. Some of these narratives are traditional, some are newly invented for all sorts of story-telling techniques, and some are cultural in nature. This tradition of story-telling which is most common among Africans shows the eagerness to ‘let it go’ ‘let it off your chest’; it prompts one into telling it all ‘straight-from-the-hip’ it makes one want to write personal history which Alfred Kazin in Dana A. Heller (1990) says is the “experience of being so much of a self constantly explaining oneself and telling one’s story” (57).

Negro spirituals, according to Faigin, were the first uniquely American music to come out of the United States of America. European classics, Anglo ballads, hymns, and Irish jigs and reels

dominated American music until the slaves created their songs of sorrow and hope to sustain them while the institution of slavery lasted. Spirituals were created over a 200-year period, but not until after the Civil War were most Americans aware of their existence. This music, so rich and varied, so deeply emotional and expressive, is a testament to the strength and tenacity of the African people who adapted to and enriched all of American culture. The songs were deliberately coined to prick the conscience of white Christian slave owners and make them reconcile their religion with slavery; they are designed to make them feel guilty about the kidnapping, the buying and selling of human beings. White slavers did not consider slaves to have souls since they were possessions like cattle or horses and since the Bible offered many examples of slavery, this somehow gave it a religious sanction in their minds. No attempts were made to teach slaves to read, write or observe formal religion since any improvement in communication skills could lead to organised rebellion.

## 2.5 SUMMARY

The slave narratives have their root deep in oral tradition. Douglass' *Narrative* helped to ignite radical moves towards changing the slave system. In his *Narrative*, he reveals the evils of slavery and in it also, he calls on 'men of colour' to take up 'arms':

Men of colour from East to West from North to South, the sky is written all over, Now or Never. Liberty won by white men would lose half its luster. Who would be free themselves must strike the blow...Remember Denmark Vasseey of Charleston, remember Nat Turner of South Hampton, remember Shields Green and Copeland who followed noble John Brown and fell as glorious martyrs for the cause of the slave... Douglass' *Narrative*

The slave experience is the major contributor to African American writing. This writing, one would say, developed from oral tradition. Writing is equated with the quest for freedom and like

learning, expressing oneself in this fashion is linked and rightly too to freedom. But the propagators of slavery never allowed this enterprise to thrive for obvious reasons; after all, *God Himself sanctioned slavery*; this is as far as the slavers were concerned. They equally believed that blacks anywhere were born servants and meant to be in eternal servitude, hence, any secular education was considered an eye-opener; they therefore discouraged it.

In the plantation, slave often settled in their cabins after the day's work to keep each other company. In a conventional African moon-light story-telling session, the slaves gather to reflect on their African past and ruminate on their present predicament. The slaves tell tales using various characters which are later developed into full-fledged real or fictional characters. We see characters such as Casey Jones, Jesse James, Frankie and Albert, like old English epic; these characters are developed, and plots are created to make them living characters in what we have as African American literature today.

The spirituals also contributed to the development of African American literature today. The lyrics, the musical elements, merged to create something distinct from other forms of writing.

Spirituals grew out of slave experience, and it is known to have been the means by which the slaves kept their minds together, but even years after emancipation of the slaves, this genre still exists in African American culture today; it has grown from the oral to the written form. This form, that is the spirituals, grew out of the vast matrix of songs of African root. During the slave period, songs like 'Sometimes, I feel like a Motherless child', 'Go Down, Moses', 'Joshua fit de battle of Jericho', 'Crucifixion', 'Steal away to Jesus', 'Roll, Jordan Roll' came up to define the situation of the black man in bondage.

Slave narratives that gave birth to autobiography have their roots deep in oral traditions in that the old strains of ballad and spiritual of the old world in Africa found expression in this writing to the extent that one often finds themes such as ‘buffalo hunting, riding the range,, building railroads, lumbering and journeys as recurrent metaphors in African American writing.

The subject of this unit is the literature of African Americans’ experience in the ‘New World’. Who or what is an African American is traced to slavery, and its experience gives room for the writing of the early years which is mainly slave narrative and later developed into full autobiography. Music, especially in the fields during long hours of physical toil, was encouraged. The slaves, it was noticed, worked harder and longer when they sang, and the music seemed to keep up their spirits. Not much attention was paid to the lyrics, and as a result, a wide range of expressive lyrics gave vent to the slaves’ desires for a better life in this world as well as in the next.

Whatever had happened years gone by is only reflected on today’s experience through writings of autobiography, prose fiction, poetry, music and drama. What is important is that African Americans’ experience in America, whatever name it is given, has been a contributing experience without which America would be considerably less developed in every sense of the word and infinitely less interesting a place to live in.

## **2.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- What impact did slave narratives have on the abolitionist movement?
- Explore Slave Narrative as an autobiography.
- Discuss the idea that Slave narratives provide man with the opportunity to better understand the experiences of slaves from the people who had endured the experience
- Examine slave narratives as a form of historical documentation.
- Can one say that slave narratives are a way for mankind to learn from the mistakes of the past?



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## UNIT 3: POST-SLAVERY ERA

### CONTENTS

#### 3.1 Introduction

#### 3.2 Objectives

#### 3.3 Main Contents

##### 3.3.1 America after the Era of Slavery

#### 3.4 Conclusion

#### 3.5 Summary

#### 3.6 Tutor-Marked Assignments

#### 3.7 References/Further Reading

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

After the end of slavery and the American Civil War, a number of African American authors continued to write non-fiction works about the condition of African Americans in the country. While the slave narrative was by far the most common form of African American literature, fiction was also important, with the period between 1850 and 1860 being known as “the first African American literary renaissance”. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published in 1852, and William Wells Brown is credited with publishing the first full-length African American novel, *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853), and travel book during this time as well. What is more, Samuel Delaney offered readers “the first black nationalist culture hero in African American literature” in his novel *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859), while Frances E.W. Harper gave readers the first short story in African American literature, “The Two Offers” (1859). Since then, there has been no stopping the African American in his/her creative ability as he/she continues to churn out literary outputs. Without the contributions of

black authors such as Douglass, Brown, Jacobs, and others, the unjust realities of slavery might well have been kept silent.

### **3.2 OBJECTIVES**

Students will

- a. be able to itemise what happened aboard the slave vessels from Africa to the new world;
- b. be able discuss what each incident reveals about views of slavery in Great Britain and the United States;
- c. write an essay exploring each country's attitude toward slavery; and
- d. see what abolition offered the ex-slaves.

### **3.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

#### **3.3.1 America after the Era of Slavery**

After the abolition of slavery, the Republicans passed the Reconstruction Act in 1867 to protect freed slaves from the white supremacist ideologies and policies being enacted in the former Confederacy. The act also established the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency that, in addition to other efforts, opened 4,000 schools—including Fisk, Morehouse, Howard, Atlanta, Talladega, and Hampton— between 1865 and 1870 to help educate the newly freed slaves. From 1865 to 1870, the Reconstruction Congress also passed the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments (1870). Unfortunately, the newly passed legislation making slavery illegal, establishing equal protection under the law for African Americans, and enfranchising black men, was not enforced throughout all parts of the states, and the lives of many freed slaves differed little from when they were enslaved.

In 1877, the Democrats regained power, and they did very little to protect the rights of the freed slaves. African Americans were then assaulted by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. These violent acts and forms of oppressions were supported by the Jim Crow laws, which legalised segregation and racism. The decrease in rights for African Americans was also impacted by the fact that many abolitionists, though they condemned slavery, did not believe in equal rights for blacks so 'freedom' as it were did not end all the problems of race in America. As discovered, most freed slaves still looked back to 'master and missus' for support.

The problem of name and naming and the fact that the so-called freedom was not genuine confronted the ex-slaves. They had to leave the slave plantations and 'go out to the world' in search of jobs. To make matter worse, the deaths and illnesses of influential African American leaders, such as Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Frances E.W. Harper, cost blacks important national voices, losses that hampered the fight for equality.

Identity was another issue that confronted the ex-slaves; this was particularly so in the light of the place of slavery in their history; should they choose to be Americans, what would be the lot of their African heritage? Should they take up Garvey's challenge to return to Africa? This theme is presented by African American writers. It is true that the issue of identity was resolved by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment but was it properly documented? No! for this reason, the Blackman still feels the need to seek and establish his cultural identity away from the mainstream America. Typically, the African American writer directs his work towards the establishment of a purely ethnic culture (Biggsby, 1980) and for Fanon; blacks should view their identity in three ways: (a.) Assimilation, (b.) Ethnic discovery, and (c) Revolution. To Fanon, after assimilation, there is the need to discover certain aspects of one's culture and values. To some African American writers,

the journey years ago from Africa to the Americas is more like a fall from grace because Africa to them is like the biblical 'Garden of Eden'

As the world turned with social and political changes, new cultural expression began to emerge. African Americans had always found a way to express themselves, even during slavery. They did this to preserve the culture of their ancestry and articulate both their struggles and hopes in their own words and images. During the Reconstruction era, several black artists and writers, particularly females, surfaced. The literature of the Reconstruction era introduced creative writers such as Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson. The era also presented amazing inspirational literature for African Americans like Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, Anna Julia Cooper's *Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race*, and of course W.E.B Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. The reconstruction was a great era for political, social, and creative change, reform, and expression.

At a time when emancipation was not enough, and slavery transformed from physical to mental, economic and social, Du Bois wrote of new movements. In the book, the activist urged education of blacks, manhood suffrage, equal economic and educational opportunities, and an end to segregation and full civil rights. Within the novel, W.E.B Du Bois even confronts Booker T. Washington for not doing more to support the civil rights movement. While the post-war reconstruction era was still a time of progression African Americans quickly set up congregations for themselves, as well as schools, community and civic associations, to have space away from white control or oversight. Black writers strongly encouraged the independence and advance of blacks in their works. Shortly after progression began, Jim Crow laws were

implemented spurring more reactions from activists, writers, and artists. Paul Laurence Dunbar is another writer who wrote to represent African Americans in a suitable manner. Dunbar faced the challenge of writing in dialect, but still representing that aspect of black culture properly. African Americans continued to contribute literature, art, agricultural skills, foods, clothing styles, music, language, social and technological innovation to American culture, as times continued to change. The African American family remained a valued characteristic in the lives of blacks. “Social reformers considered it their project to lift uncivilized people up from a natural savage state and mold them into proper citizens. Institutions such as slavery and marriage provided these reformers with a domesticating technology or lever that could pry the uncivilized apart from their savage ways” (Black History in America, n.p.). When African Americans were enslaved, social rules inhibited them from legally being married. They were thought of as being too savage and lacking the morals that are necessary to uphold the sanctity of marriage. Because slaves were not allowed to be married, many African American traditions were born, including jumping the broom. Familial bonds were strong and important to blacks even after slavery. Families that were separated during slavery were now able to be together, and many African Americans even rushed to get married when they became freedmen. The creative works of blacks showed the surge in relationships and the advancement of families.

After emancipation, it was important for African Americans to identify with the new expressions of blackness. Whether this expression came through literature, art, dance or social reforming, blacks began to identify themselves under their own terms. Authors pushed and supported black movements and the individuality and defining of blacks. The New Negro Movement actually, as documented by Alain Locke, defined a new era for African Americans everywhere who sought equality and self-identification as a people. This was a time for great beginnings and a surge in

the black arts. This collection of literary and intellectual arts molded a new identity for African American culture. The movement both as literary and cultural movement raised significant issues affecting the lives of African Americans through various forms especially in literature, art, music, drama, painting, sculpture, movies, and protests

The theme of the divided man is also clearly expressed in post-slavery African American literature. It was W.E.B DuBios who hinted at 'double-consciousness', 'two souls in one body' and the fusion of both 'selves', no matter how conflicting they may appear, breed a neutral art or an 'amalgam'.

Although African Americans continued to contribute much to the progress of the United States during this time, it was a time of disappointment, discrimination and danger. For example, historian John Hope Franklin notes that more than 2,500 lynchings, mostly of blacks, occurred in the South in the last two decades of the 19th century. Despite this dire period in African American history, many black authors were still able to publish their work in magazines, newspapers, and occasionally, through an established press. African American literature was marked by tales of overcoming trials and hardships while demonstrating the capabilities of African Americans as authors despite difficulties being published. Because African American authors had more difficulty getting their works published, many turned to the African American press, an institution heavily reliant on African American church leaders. Through presses, such as the National Baptist Publishing Company, many writers published songs, poems, fiction and autobiographies. In slavery, African Americans overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to survive. During Reconstruction, former slaves drew on their past as motivation to overcome the current injustices which they suffered as free men and women and to inspire others to do the



same. Whites could put up a wall, but blacks would climb over it again and again. They demonstrated perseverance in their lives and in their writing. From available literature, it is glaring that even after the declaration of emancipation for slaves in America, ex-slaves were still seen as sub-human and incapable of mastering “the arts and sciences.” Their inferiority was even reinforced by prominent white philosophers of the time, like David Hume and Immanuel Kant.

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay note in their introduction to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Hume suspected “negroes . . . to be naturally inferior to the whites’ with no “ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences” (xl). However, as Gates and McKay further note, “African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition” (xxxvii). The main goal of early African American writing was to demonstrate that they could create literature that rivaled or surpassed that of the white community, proving African Americans to be *full and equal members* of society (xxxviii). However, it is a fact that even after this so-called ‘demonstration’ African American still faced criticism from prominent members of white society. Thomas Jefferson, for example, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), made disparaging remarks about the poems of the first published African American female poet, Phillis Wheatley: “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. . . . Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet” (qtd. xl-xli).

Moreover, African American writers struggled for recognition as authors. Wheatley, for example, had to go to court in Boston in 1761 to prove that she was the author of her poems (xli). Unfortunately, having the court verify her authorship did not help because Boston printers

continued to be dubious. Therefore, she had to get her work published in London first. We also know that in spite of the criticism and downgrading of African American literary outputs, they have continued to excel; they have continued the struggle to define themselves, their craft, and their culture, and they have also continued to face resistance from a predominantly white reading public. Even as late as 1970, at Kent State University, a well-known scholar and member of a thesis committee resigned when Ralph Ellison became an approved dissertation topic. The dissenting member stated that Ellison was not a literary heavyweight and that to focus an entire dissertation on him would be like addressing the “wings of a gnat” (qtd. xliii). Only in recent years have we encountered mainstream acceptance of African American authors, such as poet Maya Angelou, who spoke at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993, or Toni Morrison, who won a Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 (xlii-xliii).

African American writers shared a common burden over time: the burden of representing not only themselves but the African American race as well. Maintaining the position of what it means to be black in America allowed them, as it were, to establish an African American identity that transcended the individual. They, in this stead, have been able to cultivate what Carter G. Woodson referred to as “the public Negro mind” (qtd. xliv), as they have been able to establish their intellectual potentials.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

From the fore-going, one can deduce that African American history and literature are intrinsically linked; they are symbolically connected. African American literature, as a vital aspect of the whole has been able to testify against slavers, those who institutionalised slavery. It

has been able to bear witness to the urge to be free and literacy, it has also been able to embrace the European Enlightenment's dream of reason and the American Enlightenment's dream of civil liberty" (xxxvii). This growing body of works shows that the African is indeed human and should not have been enslaved. African Americans today continue to write in an effort to honour and acknowledge that legacy of sacrifice and 'will'. The "black voice" that Wheatley aimed to unearth is the same voice that is present in the works of artists like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison, even the 'young trees' growing out of this society. Despite changes in American culture and the passage of time, the themes that were present in the 18th century slave writings continue to be explored and discussed in today's literary enterprise.

We have been able to point out the fact that literature, whether autobiography, fiction, or journalism, was and still is a key weapon in combating slavery of whatever posture or colour in the world today. Literature spoke for millions of African Americans who did not have a voice. Without the contributions of black authors, such as Douglass, Brown, Jacobs, and others, the unjust realities of the journey that started during the 'middle passage' from Africa would have gone into the abyss of permanent silence.

### **3.5 SUMMARY**

African American culture as well as literature has always drawn on their historical roots in oral tradition for artistic inspiration. Music, both sacred and secular, has lent its rhythms equally to poetry, sermons and fiction. Oral folk tales and spirituals have migration themes often referring to Heaven, Africa and the North. Spirituals often have their themes presented through biblical

characters, those who persevered and delivered assurances that they were being watched over by a guardian.

In this unit, we have tried to look at the post-slavery era in terms of the volume of artistic works that was produced. We have also tried to examine different influences on this production; particularly the spirituals and the blues, the use of vernacular, the folktales and the storytelling tradition inherited from Africa and brought to the plantation.



## **End of Slavery**



**The end of the Civil War brought the 13th Amendment, ending slavery and providing emancipation for more than four million enslaved people**



**Ending slavery was a moral question that haunted early American history, but it was one inextricably tangled up in economics.**



## Emancipation Proclamation



Most of the images, which reveal what freedom looked like for black Americans in the Civil War era, were taken between the 1850s and the 1930s.

### 3.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS

- Discuss the African American socio-historical experiences from the 17th Century to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Examine the idea that enslaved Africans came from an extremely large geographical area and were very diverse in terms of ethnicity/nationality and culture.

### 3.7 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 4: HARLEM RENAISSANCE

### CONTENTS

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 Main Contents
  - 4.3.1 Prominent Features of the Harlem Renaissance
  - 4.3.2 Harlem Renaissance and Its significance
  - 4.3.3 Harlem Renaissance's legacy
  - 4.3.4 Some of the Famous Poems of the Era
- 4.4 Conclusion
- 4.5 Summary
- 4.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 4.7 References/Further Reading

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Harlem is vicious modernism  
Vicious the way it's made,  
Can you stand such beauty?  
So violent and transforming-(Amiri Baraka)

#### **'Harlem'**

*Harlem...Harlem*

*Black, black Harlem*

*Souls of Black Folk*

*Ask Du Bois*

*Little grey restless feet*

*Ask Claude McKay*

*City of Refuge*

*Ask Rudolph Fisher*



*Don't damn your body's itch*

*Ask Countee Cullen*

*Does the jazz band sob?*

*Ask Langston Hughes*

*Nigger Heaven*

*Ask Carl Van Vechten*

*Hey! ... Hey!*

*... Say it brother*

*Say it ...*

(Frank Horne, "Harlem")

The Harlem Renaissance is seen as a significant social and cultural movement which took place in the 1920s and 1930s following the Great Migration during which thousands of African Americans left the south and moved north and west. The Harlem Renaissance marked a turning point for African American literature. Before this time, books by African Americans were primarily read by other Black people. But with the renaissance, African American literature as well as black fine art and performance art began to be absorbed into the mainstream of American culture. The outcome is the flourishing and enduring art, music and literature that reflected the history and experience of the African American. The artistic, literary and musical contributions of Harlem Renaissance artists continue to serve as an inspiration for artists even today.

The Harlem Renaissance is considered a heroic moment in American history. Its primary aim was to give African Americans the same citizenship rights that white Americans took for granted. The Harlem of 1919-1940 was blooming with African American creativity. This era juxtaposed the poverty and racism African Americans faced with avant-garde advances in music,

dance, art, and literature. The movement is not traceable to any definable origin, but many believe that New York City enticed frustrated African Americans who were fleeing from the segregation and violence of the South. These men and women were in search of a better life that could translate to quality housing and decent wages in the industrial factories; so African Americans migrated in droves to the cities in the North. As all Americans grew more interested in the African American culture, Harlem was dubbed “the Negro capital of the world” (n.p.) by James Weldon Johnson.

The publication of the avant-garde *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) encouraged black writers to extricate themselves from the stereotypes that had imprisoned African American literature for years. They confronted difficult conflicts regarding black identity, black art and the political role of culture. For instance we have writers who had views as to how important African heritage should be to African American writers. Langston Hughes, for example, suggested that *racial commitment on the part of the black artist* was an idea that black artists should not forget soon, whereas Cullen suggested *that Africa was a source of confusion and ambivalence* for black artists.

## **4.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this unit are to help students

- a. explain why Harlem is so important in Africa-American history;
- b. generate pride in Africa-American culture;
- c. itemise and discuss the social, cultural and political circumstances which gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance;

- d. learn about the influences that inspired the work of the Harlem Renaissance's artists and musicians;
- e. create their own Harlem Renaissance-inspired works;
- f. examine the contributions African -Americans writers, artists, and musicians made during the Harlem Renaissance;
- g. identify the accomplishments of three individuals (Langston Hughes, Louis Armstrong, and Jacob Lawrence) who made significant contributions to the understanding of African Americans and the challenges they faced;
- h. become active historians as they analyse and interpret historical data;
- i. analyse primary source materials to gain a deeper understanding of the daily life of African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s; and
- j. discuss the importance of non-print evidence in studying African American history.

#### **4.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

The roots of the Harlem Renaissance, that is, the historical roots, are complex. Partly, these roots lie in the vast migration of African Americans to northern industrial centers, especially after the emancipation, but was made more pronounced at the turn of the century and increased rapidly during World War I as production needs and labour shortages boosted job opportunities for the races. Because of the harsh realities experienced in the North, African Americans targeted New York for settlement, hence one sees that with migration up North, African American artists and intellectuals were often seen in New York City, where powerful voices for racial pride such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and James Weldon Johnson were concentrated. By the 1910s,

Harlem had become a spirited community that provided continuity and support for a diverse population of black men/women pouring in from the South and the Caribbean.

The question may be why Harlem was their destination. This is because Harlem as it were represents a rallying point for disappointed African Americans who saw limited opportunities open to them in the South, hence, going up North was a survival strategy. Increased contact between African Americans and white Americans in the workplace and on city streets forced a new awareness of the disparity between the promise of U.S. democracy and its reality because liberty as propounded did not translate to true freedom for the African Americans. African American soldiers who served in World War I were angered by the prejudice they often encountered back at home, compared to the greater acceptance they had found in Europe. A larger, better- educated urban population fully comprehended the limitations that white-dominated society had placed on them. Thus, African -Americans became increasingly disillusioned about what the white man called justice that war-time rhetoric promised them; therefore, they were determined to lay out their goals of equality and success more aggressively than ever before.

The process of school integration that started with the Brown decision of 1954 was equally seen as a failure because many schools remained segregated by race as blacks and whites still, mostly, live in distinct neighborhoods.



### **Schools were segregated in the North and South**

Although *Brown* dealt only with discrimination in education, it effectively sounded the death-knell for the whole Jim Crow system of second-class citizenship. That is its greatest significance. However, it took the efforts—and in some cases the lives—of many men and women, black and white, to finally conquer Jim Crow as inequality remains. The civil rights movement tried but could not achieve complete equality; so they asked for greater equality. It brought the reality of Virginia closer to the promise articulated by Virginian Thomas Jefferson when he wrote "that all men are created equal" (The U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776).



### **African Americans were bonded outside the nuclear family system**

In the 1920s and 1930s, African American writers, musicians and artists did a lot to promote blackness. The paintings of Jacob Lawrence show the challenges which African Americans faced as they left the South for cities in the North. Poets like Langston Hughes focused on discrimination and mistreatment of African Americans, but offered hope as they built a better future for themselves. African American music was deeply rooted in their African religious and cultural traditions. Slave songs were sung to make hard work easier and give slaves hope of a brighter future. Harlem in the 1920 and 1930s fostered the environment in which African Americans drew upon their rich culture and traditions to create new musical forms. Louis Armstrong working with Fletcher Henderson's big band helped to develop the big band jazz sound.

By this time also, migration became the only way out of misery of the South, to the extent that the new destination witnessed a huge concentration of African Americans escaping the harsh realities in the South. They had to escape scarce economic opportunities, in search of a better life and job opportunities, in a new region. Thus, Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, became the “Negro Capital of America.” In Harlem, African Americans found the hope of greater freedom. Here, they were able to escape mistreatment by whites, unfair criminal systems, lynchings and poverty. According to James Weldon Johnson’s 1933 description of the Harlem Renaissance, “Harlem was made known as the scene of laughter, singing, dancing...Writers flocked [gathered] there; many came from far, and depicted [showed] it in many ways and in many languages. They still come; the Harlem of story and song still fascinates them”.

Harlem Renaissance signifies a rebirth/awakening, a time when the arts flourish. Hence, Harlem became a center for creativity. It was a place where the most talented black artists came to express their African American experiences through their craft. It was a time in African American history when the desire on the part of the artists to share their life stories especially from their African root was most strong. At a time when racism and social and political injustices were part of the fabric of American society, these artists through their work expressed a strong cultural pride and a burning desire for political and social equality.

With time and with different political and economic movements around at the time, African Americans were motivated, and in this sense, a new sense of empowerment was created in African Americans.

The NAACP at a time was an important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance. In the early 1920s, Marcus Garvey’s message of racial pride drew hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and

women to his United Negro Improvement Association and its Back-to-Africa movement. Other African Americans, including many intellectuals, turned to socialism or communism. By 1920, large numbers of African Americans of all political and economic points of view were plainly unwilling to settle for the old ways; rather, they talked about greater freedom and justice. One unexpected development had an impact on the form their demand for change would take: urbane whites suddenly “took up” New York’s African American community, bestowing patronage on young artists, opening up publishing opportunities, and pumping cash into Harlem’s “exotic” nightlife in a complex relationship that scholars continue to probe. Fuelled by all of these historical forces, an unprecedented out-pouring of writing, music and visual arts began among African American artists. The artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance was dominated by two ideologies, both driven by racial consciousness and pride. The first is represented by W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP, Howard University philosophy Professor Alain Locke; sociologist Charles Spurgeon, and others, who extolled the arts as an area where talented and culturally privileged African Americans could lead their race’s fight for equality. They believed that works of fine art inspired by the artists’ racial heritage and experience would prove the beauty of their race and its crucial contribution to American culture. They feel that artistic successes could be counted on to give the much desired pride for all African Americans and prove to the white public that educated African Americans are of equal status as the white educated class.

In “Criteria for Negro Art,” Du Bois argues that: “We have a right, in our effort to get just treatment, to insist that we produce something of the best in human character and that it is unfair to judge us by our criminals and prostitutes. This is justifiable propaganda”. (*The Crisis*,



21 June 1921: 55-56). Du Bois hailed the “Talented Tenth” and Locke the “New Negro” as thinking persons whose race had survived war, migration, and prejudice, and had the strength and vision to lead the way to social justice.



**On the left hand side is Du Bois, a notable proponent of Pan-Africanism, prominent intellectual and civil right activist, co-founder of NAACP and Niagara movement and on the right hand side is Booker T. Washington, who was a political leader, educator, author, and one of the dominant figures in African American culture and politics in the early 20th century.**

There was opposition to art-as-propaganda as some feel that the ordinary African American should be the central focus in the fight for justice; thus, people such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas took a stand voiced in Wallace Thurman’s short-lived journal, *Fire!*, claiming the need to present the ordinary African American person objectively as an individual simply living in the flesh-and-blood world. Their argument was against painting and characterising only “cultured” and “high-class” African Americans who mirrored the standards of white society. In doing so, they spoke for young artists who chose to pursue their art for its own sake. These artists spoke for young artists whose unique experience

as African American men and women was not discussed. As the white literary establishment became fascinated with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and began publishing them in larger numbers, the writers themselves became accepted by the white world, but as far as Langston Hughes was concerned, this was not necessarily important. As he puts it, the *expression of our individual dark-skinned selves* is paramount.

Harlem Renaissance encouraged black cultural identity as African Americans had endured centuries of slavery and the struggle for abolition. The end of bondage had not brought the Promised Land many had envisioned. Instead, White Supremacy was quickly, legally and violently restored to the New South, where ninety percent of African Americans lived. Many discovered they had shared common experiences in their past histories and their uncertain present circumstances. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, the recently dispossessed ignited an explosion of cultural pride. Indeed, African American culture was reborn in the Harlem.

Great voices came out of Harlem of 1920s and 1930s. Alain Locke was a prolific writer during this era in African American history. He was a Harvard graduate and Rhodes Scholar who taught Philosophy at Howard University for 36 years. There is the renowned social scientist Kenneth B. Clark who taught Psychology at New York City College. His work on the psychology of segregation played a very important role in the Supreme Court ruling on Brown vs. Board Education in 1954. The most prolific writer of the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes who cast off the influences of white poets and wrote with the rhythmic meter of blues and jazz. Claude McKay was another great voice from the Harlem Renaissance; he came out and urged African Americans to stand up for their rights in his powerful verses. Jean Toomer wrote plays and short stories, as well as poems, to capture the spirit of his times which was black pride and

identity. Book publishers soon took notice and patronised many of these talents. Zora Neale Hurston was in this stead noticed especially with her moving novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Music met prose in the form of musical comedy. The 1921 production of *Shuffle Along* is sometimes credited with initiating the Harlem movement where actor Paul Robeson electrified audiences with his memorable stage performances.

Harlem Renaissance was not short of very notable musicians as it shaped America and the entire world with its jazz music which flouted many musical conventions with its rhythms and improvised instrumental solos. Thousands of city dwellers flocked night after night to see the same performers. Of course, there were improvisations of every kind which meant that no two performances would ever be the same. Harlem's clubs, especially the Cotton Club, helped to project the talents of Duke Ellington and singers, such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday popularised blues and jazz vocals. Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong captivated huge audiences as white Americans, as well as African Americans caught jazz fever.

Harlem was the new American city that brought some of the greatest minds of the day together. It shone its lights on great works that might otherwise have been lost or never produced. The results were phenomenal. The artists of the Harlem Renaissance undoubtedly transformed African American culture. But the impact on all American culture was equally strong. For the first time, white America could not look away; they could not diminish the talents that came out of Harlem.

The popularity of jazz among whites helped spark a “Negro Vogue” in cities, such as New York and Paris in the mid- to late 1920s. Simultaneously, European dramatists extolled the body

language of African American dance and stage humour. The best-known white man to bring attention to the Harlem Renaissance was undoubtedly Carl Van Vechten, whose music criticism trumpeted the significance of jazz and blues and whose provocatively titled novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) helped spread the Negro Vogue. It served virtually as a tourist guide to Harlem, capitalising on the supposed “exotic” aspects of black urban life even while focusing, primarily, on the frustrations of black urban professionals and aspiring writers.

The international appeal of jazz and its connection to common black life, accompanied by the sheer virtuosity of its musicians, encouraged black intellectuals in other fields to turn increasingly to specifically “Negro” aesthetic forms as a basis for innovation and self-expression. The tendency appeared in concert music, choral programs and Broadway musicals, as well as literature. Popular revues and vaudeville acts drew all-black audiences throughout the United States in cities on the Theatre Owners Booking Association circuit. In the 1920s, black-produced shows came to Broadway again and again, and many white-produced shows featured black casts. The success of such shows helped fuel the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance. Amid worsening socio-economic conditions in Harlem itself and political setbacks in what was a very conservative and racist era—it was during the 1920s that the Ku Klux Klan reached its peak in membership and political influence in the South and the Midwest—some black leaders hoped that achievement in the arts would help revolutionize race relations while enhancing blacks’ understanding of themselves as a people.

American magazine editors organised literary prize contests and other events showcasing black literary talent. The event had the effect of announcing what had come to resemble a “movement”—a cohort of talented African American writers ready to be noticed. *The New*

*Negro: An Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke appeared in 1925. This book was well received and so garnered positive critical attention in addition to inspiring black readers and would-be authors. In the book, Locke tried to direct the “movement” he announced in *The New Negro*, stressing a turn away from social protest or propaganda toward self-expression built on what he termed “folk values”—a movement. Locke was of the opinion that black authors and artists should develop distinct aesthetic tendencies inspired by African American folk sources/roots and African traditions.

Though Harlem Renaissance ended with the advent of the Great Depression, it was still a remarkable era for black creativity in that African American artists created positive and memorable standards in all the arts. They were able to challenge white paternalism and racism even in the face of persecution. African American artists and intellectuals ignored mere imitation of the styles of Europeans and white Americans; instead they celebrated black pride and creativity. Declaring their freedom to express themselves as artists and intellectuals, they explored their identities as black Americans, celebrating the black culture that had emerged out of slavery and their cultural ties to Africa. The images created during the Harlem Renaissance and represented African American culture served as inspiration and comfort to the black artists that succeeded the movement.

Personalities of the Harlem Renaissance include: Baker, Josephine, Barnes, Albert C. Bennett, Gwendolyn Blake, Eubie Bonner, Marita Bontemps, Arna Brathwaite, William Brown, Sterling Coleman, Anita Scott Covarrubias, Miguel Cullen, Countee, Du Bois, W.E.B. Fisher, Rudolph Garvey, Marcus Hughes, Langston Hurston, Zora Neale Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, Helene Johnson, James W. Larsen, Nella Locke, Alain McKay, Claude Thurman, Wallace Toomer, Jean

#### **4.3.1 Prominent Features of the Harlem Renaissance**

- Harlem Renaissance brought the Black experience clearly within the general American cultural history.
- The Black migration, from south to north, changed their image from rural to urban, from peasant to sophisticated.
- Harlem became a crossroads where Blacks interacted with and expanded their contacts internationally.
- Harlem Renaissance profited from a spirit of self-determination which was widespread after World War I.
- Harlem Renaissance became a rallying point for blacks in the Americas
- The creation of the "New Negro" failed, but it was an American failure, similar to other frustrated promotions.
- The future of the "New Negro" was accepted without question especially with its cultural revolution.

#### **4.3.2 Harlem Renaissance and Its Significance**

- It became a symbol and a point of reference for everyone to recall.
- The name, more than the place, became synonymous with new vitality, Black urbanity, and Black militancy.
- It became a racial focal point for Blacks the world over; it remained, for a time, a race capital.
- It stood for urban pluralism; Alain Locke wrote: "The peasant, the student, the businessman, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker,

preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast, each group has come with its own special motives ... but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another."

(Alain Locke, *The New Negro*)

- The complexity of the urban setting was important for Blacks to truly appreciate the variety of Black life. The race consciousness required that shared experience.

### **4.3.3 Harlem Renaissance's Legacy**

Harlem Renaissance's legacy is not necessarily limited by the character of the Renaissance because:

- It encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture.
- Peasant folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for racial imagination, and it freed the Blacks from the establishment of past condition.
- Harlem Renaissance was imprisoned by its innocence. The Harlem intellectuals, while proclaiming a new race consciousness, became mimics of Whites, wearing clothes and using manners of sophisticated Whites, earning the epithet "dicty niggers" from the very people they were supposed to be championing.
- Harlem Renaissance could not overcome the overwhelming White presence in commerce which defined art and culture. What was needed was a rejection of White values; they had to see Whites, without awe of love or awe of hate, and themselves truly, without myth or fantasy, in order that they could be themselves in life and art.
- Though Harlem Renaissance created an ethnic provincialism and its biggest gift could be a lesson from its failures, the biggest is in the strange separation of the Blacks from

American culture. Except for a few Blacks, the most striking thing about them is that they are Native Americans. The negative implications have been clear: Blacks, unlike other immigrants, had no immediate past and history and culture to celebrate. But the positive implications of American nativity have never been fully appreciated by them. It seems too simple: the African American's history and culture is American, more completely so than most others in the country. At least the decade of the 1920s seems to have been too early for Blacks to have felt the certainty about native culture that would have freed them from crippling self-doubt. That is why the art of the Renaissance was so problematic, feckless, not fresh, not real. The lesson it leaves us is that the true Black Renaissance awaits African Americans' claiming their *patria*, their nativity. (from Huggins, Nathan I. 1971)

Harlem Renaissance's legacy is not necessarily limited by the character of the Renaissance is culled from Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 9: Harlem Renaissance - An Introduction." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/9intro.html>

#### **4.3.4 Some of the Famous Poems of the Era**

##### **1. 'I Too' by Langston Hughes (1926)**

*I, too, sing America*

*I am the darker brother,*

*They send me to eat in the kitchen*

*When company comes,*

*But I laugh,*



*And eat well,*

*And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,*

*I'll sit at the table*

*When company comes.*

*Nobody'll dare*

*Say to me*

*"Eat in the kitchen,"*

*Then.*

*Besides,*

*They'll see how beautiful I am*

*And be ashamed,—*

*I, too, am America.* (culled from *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke)

### **1. White Houses**

Your door is shut against my tightened face,

And I am sharp as steel with discontent;

But I possess the courage and grace

To bear my anger proudly and unbent.

The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my face,

A chafing savage, down the decent street,

And passion rends my vitals as I pass

Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.

Oh I must search for wisdom every hour,

Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,

And find in it the superhuman power

To hold me to the letter of your law!

Oh I must keep my heart inviolate

Against the potent poison of your hate

(Claude McKay) culled from *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke.

## **2. 'The Day-Breaker' by Arna Bontemps**

We are not come to wage strife

With swords upon this hill,

It is not wise to waste the life

Against a stubborn will.

Yet would we die as some have done.

Beating a way for the rising sun.

(Culled from *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke.)

## **3. 'Escape' by Georgia Douglass Johnson**

Shadows, shadows,

Hug me round

So that I shall not be found

By sorrow:

She pursues me

Everywhere,

I can't lose her

Anywhere

Fold me in your black

Abyss,

She will never look

In this, ---

Shadows, shadows,

Hug me round

In your solitude

Profound.

(Culled from *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke.)

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

There is a sense among many critics and historians today that having art created by African Americans taken seriously is a milestone for the Blackman in America. Some critics will want us to believe that most of the works produced during the Renaissance were not of outstanding quality and that the period inevitably has been idealised; others equally stressed that the real point is the breakthroughs made during this era especially in the areas of technical mastery and ideological content. Of course, there is another take that the Harlem Renaissance was an elitist intellectual movement that barely touched the masses. However, according to Nathan Huggins,

The idea that despite a history that had divided them, art and culture would reform the brotherhood in a common humanity . . . was an attitude of cultural elitism. But it is wrong to assume that these black intellectuals, because of it, were not related to the black common man in Harlem. I think . . . most Negroes were apt to agree that [the artistic output] was a good thing. . . . And such an achievement, because

it was elite in character, was a source of race pride and an argument against continued discrimination. [*Harlem Renaissance*, 5–6]

Other authorities point to progress in relations between Africans and white Americans. It was during the Harlem Renaissance that both races were accepted as equals, that is, to make and exploit social contact. Also, the movement articulated some priorities for the achievement of racial equality that have been played out in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

From the foregoing, one could deduce that Harlem Renaissance was a liberating step in the search by African Americans for artistic and cultural identity on their own terms.

#### 4.5 SUMMARY

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." --W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

The workings of the human heart are the profoundest mystery of the universe. One moment they make us despair of our kind, and the next we see in them the reflection of the divine image." - Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932) *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)

"We have come over a way that with tears has been watered, We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered." -- James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) "Lift Every Voice and Sing", stanza 2 (1900)

Harlem Renaissance was a remarkable time when African American artists created positive and memorable standards in all the arts. Challenging white paternalism and racism, African American artists and intellectuals snubbed mere imitation of the styles of Europeans and white Americans and instead celebrated black pride and creativity. Declaring their freedom to express themselves as artists and intellectuals, they explored their identities as black Americans, celebrating the black culture that had emerged out of slavery and their cultural ties to Africa. The

images created during the Harlem Renaissance and represented African American culture served as inspiration and comfort to the black artists that succeeded the movement.

In their works, African American writers confronted difficult conflicts regarding black identity, black art and the political role of culture. For example, writers taking part in the renaissance held conflicting views as to how important African heritage should be to African American writers. Langston Hughes, for example, suggested that “racial commitment on the part of the black artist” was an idea that black artists should not soon forget, whereas Cullen suggested “that Africa was a source of confusion and ambivalence” (“Africa and the Hyphenated Man in America: The Harlem Renaissance”, web.) for black artists. Regardless of their opinions on the matter, both Hughes and Cullen believed that black writers should stay away from too much focus on the political constraints that an older generation had emphasised.

### **The Road by Helena Johnson**

Ah, little road all whirry in the breeze,  
A leaping clay hill lost among the trees,  
The bleeding note of rapture streaming thrush  
Caught in a drowsy hush  
And stretched out in a single singing line of dusky song,  
Ah little road, brown as my race is brown,  
Your trodden beauty like our trodden pride,  
Dusk of the dust, they must not bruise you down,  
Rise to one brimming golden, spilling cry!

(Culled from *The New Negro*, 1927:300)

James Weldon Johnson states in his article ‘Harlem: The Culture Capital’ that Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, to him; Harlem is a “city within a city, that is, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is the ...the most beautiful and healthy sections of the city” (*The New Negro*, 1927:301).

Harlem offered African Americans more advantages and opportunities than any other city in the United States, and, of course, it was the intellectual, cultural and the financial center for African Americans across America and beyond and it will remain a vital influence on African Americans for a long time. It is not only a place where the black race must *live and move and have their beings amidst difficulties and vicissitudes of the tangled issues of race adjustment*, it is a place for Negroes to express their ambition and high-mindedness. According to Kelly Miller (cited in *The New Negro*, 1927:322), “Pessimism enfeebles the faculties, paralyzes the energies and sours the soul”. Hence, the African American must be redeemed from self-surrender, rather he must be strong, courageous, firm and direct everything that concerns him with the ideals of God, country and truth. Harlem provided this avenue for the African American to fully realise and express his true self even if this ‘self’ is conflicting.

“BROTHER TO BROTHER is the first feature-length narrative drama that deals with the rich cultural time period known as the Harlem Renaissance. It presents the lives and experiences of well-known writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston who are read throughout the world and brings wider recognition to lesser-known but equally important figures such as Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman. The film strives to make links between these historical figures and the lives of young, contemporary African American artists as they begin to emerge and fulfill their full potential.”

—*Writer/Director Rodney Evans*



Langston Hughes



Women of the Harlem Renaissance



W.E.B. Du Bois, co-founder of the NAACP, created *The Crisis Magazine*, which spoke to the injustices that African Americans faced during the Harlem





#### 4.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS

- Write an essay on the Lasting Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Compare and contrast the circumstances of African Americans and whites at this time, especially in relation to race.
- Consider what factors influenced the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North and Midwest.
- Why do you think the arts are an effective means through which individuals and groups can express their history, their frustrations and their hopes for the future? Give contemporary examples.
- How did the creative expression of African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s lead to a new black cultural identity?
- How did the Harlem Renaissance help Americans to understand the history and culture of African Americans?

#### 4.7 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## **UNIT 5: CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND BLACK ART/BLACK POWER ERA**

### **CONTENTS**

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Objectives

5.3 Main Contents

5.3.1 Black Art and Its Influence in the Achievement of Equality for African Americans

5.4 Conclusion

5.5 Summary

5.6 Tutor-Marked Assignments

5.7 References/Further Reading

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The Civil Rights Movement tried abolishing public and private acts of racial discrimination against African Americans from 1954 to 1968, particularly in the southern part of the United States. By 1966, the emergence of the Black Power Movement, which lasted from 1966 to 1975, expanded upon the aims of the Civil Rights Movement to include racial dignity, economic and political self-sufficiency, and freedom from white authority. Aside from literature, there were protests against racial discrimination; there were physical protest against obnoxious laws against blacks in the US.

The march for total freedom for the Blackman began when Rosa Park said her firm 'no' in a bus. This low but strong one woman protest ignited the long but patient march to freedom from segregation. Park was arrested, and this led to a boycott of the city buses for over a year. At this stage, Martin Luther King Jr, a 26-year old minister of the gospel was given the mantle by his people to lead the protest against white supremacy.

## **5.2 OBJECTIVES**

Students should be able to:

- a. explain the concepts of segregation and "separate but equal";
- b. discuss post-World War II steps toward desegregation such as breaking baseball's color barrier, desegregating the armed forces, and integrating public schools;
- c. highlight the roles played by various key black and white Americans in the fight for equal rights;
- d. discuss the nature and scope of non-violent measures applied by civil rights activists to secure desegregation and equal treatment under the law; and
- e. discuss the nature and significance of key civil rights legislation passed in 1964 and 1965.

## **5.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

The civil rights movement is said to be a heroic episode in American history. Its purpose was to give African Americans the same citizenship rights that whites took for granted. It was a war waged on many fronts. In the 1960s, it achieved impressive judicial and legislative victories against discrimination in public accommodations and voting. It had considerable success in combating job and housing discrimination. Scholars refer to the Civil Rights Movement as the Second Reconstruction because the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent Black Power Movement was the culmination of generations of oppression and contained several key events in American history, including the murder of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, the desegregation of Little Rock, Arkansas, multiple sit-ins and freedom rides, the 1963

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and many other notable events. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the conditions which brought it into being are credited with putting pressure on President John F. Kennedy and then Lyndon B. Johnson to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and labour unions.

The 1963 demonstration led to confrontation in which hundreds were injured in Birmingham, and after this incident, King Jr. intensified his pressure on the authority. Within a year, they all converged from all over in Washington DC for a march that went beyond the limitation of language and culture as all came out to express something that was neither pure rage nor pure joy but a universal expression of disdain. Everyone was on fire for permanent freedom and in 1964, the law that changed America for good was signed abolishing 'coloured only' 'White only' syndrome. This gave both races equal citizenship and the result of these protests was overwhelming so much so that people began to glisten into Robert A. Young and Walker's prediction that *a messiah will arise among blacks who will deliver his people from the shackles of slavery and exploitation*. Martin Luther Jr. perhaps fulfilled the 'scriptures' and died as a martyr for the salvation of his people.

The movement took different shapes and posture; it was more like a war, a war waged on many fronts. In the 1960s, it achieved impressive judicial and legislative victories against discrimination in public accommodations and voting. It had successes in combating job and housing discrimination in America. The problem with white America was that segregation was not only by race but also by class. The problem of poverty compounded by drugs, crime, and

broken families, intensified the urge to speak out even though it is said that these problems were not necessarily solved by the Civil Rights Movement.

However, in all, those who benefited mostly from this were middle-class blacks—the teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals who had served as role models for the black community. Their departure for formerly all-white areas left all-black neighborhoods segregated not only by race but now also by class. The problem of poverty, compounded by drugs, crime and broken families, was a huge burden on the Civil Rights Movement.

It was Martin Delaney who bluntly declared in 1852 that:

The colored people are not yet known, even to their most professed friends among the white Americans; for the reason, that politicians, religionists, colonizationists, and abolitionists, have each and all, at different times, presumed to think for, dictate to, and know better what suited colored people, than they knew for themselves . . . (116)

For this pioneer of antiracist movements, it is not enough to just sit by and think that decision-making should be left to “good, well-intentioned whites” and blacks should merely be grateful that American “democracy” freed African Americans from slavery. What you asked for, you get but if you wait and ask for nothing, then you get nothing; this is life’s principle. Racism, they say, is the power one group possesses to dominate and control other races. And historically, whites have been the group with the greatest amount of power in American society and elsewhere to control other races and this is what Civil Rights movement tried to critique by appraising the whole essence of “whiteness.” Therefore, it cannot be denied that the anti-racist activists of the 1960s inspire much of the thinking on racism today.



If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, "There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization. -- Martin Luther King Jr.

If we accept and acquiesce in the face of discrimination, we accept the responsibility ourselves and allow those responsible to salve their conscience by believing that they have our acceptance and concurrence. We should, therefore, protest openly everything . . . that smacks of discrimination or slander." -- Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) "Certain Unalienable Rights", *What the Negro Wants*, edited by Rayford W. Logan (1944)

The migration which had given birth to Harlem also empowered the growing American Civil Rights movement, and this made a powerful impression on Black writers during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Just as Black activists were pushing to end segregation and racism and create a new sense of Black Nationalism, so also were Black authors attempting to address these issues with their writings. One of the first writers to do so was James Baldwin, whose works addressed issues of race and sexuality. Baldwin, who is best known for his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, wrote deeply personal stories and essays while examining what it was like to be both

Black and homosexual at a time when neither of these identities was accepted by American culture. In all, Baldwin wrote nearly 20 books, including such classics as *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time*.

Baldwin's idol and friend was author Richard Wright, whom Baldwin called the greatest Black writer in the world. Wright is best known for his novel *Native Son* (1940), which tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black man struggling for acceptance in Chicago. Baldwin was so impressed by the novel that he titled a collection of his own essays *Notes of a Native Son*, in reference to Wright's novel. Among Wright's other books are the autobiographical novel *Black Boy* (1945), *The Outsider* (1953), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957).

There were other great novelists of the era; for instance, people like Ralph Ellison, best known for his novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), which won the National Book Award in 1953. We equally know that the *Invisible Man* was such a powerful tool for the Civil Rights movement as well as an influential document of African American literary history. After Ellison's death in 1994, a second novel, *Juneteenth* (1999), was pieced together from the 2,000-plus pages he had written over 40 years. Other writings came up later; for example, writers such as the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize when it was awarded for her 1949 book of poetry. We also have Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Lorraine Hansberry, whose play *A Raisin in the Sun* focuses on a poor Black family living in Chicago. The play won the 1959 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award; we also have Amiri Baraka, who wrote controversial off-Broadway plays such as *Dutchman*. It is also worthy of note that a number of important essays and books about human rights were written by the leaders of the Civil Rights



Movement. One of the leading examples of these is Martin Luther King, Jr "Letter from Birmingham Jail".

In spite of all the efforts of the Civil Rights leaders, inequality remains. The average income of black families is still well below that of whites. Even college-educated blacks earn less than their white counterparts. The Civil Rights Movement did not achieve complete equality, but greater equality. It brought the reality in America closer to the promise articulated by Virginian Thomas Jefferson when he wrote *that all men are created equal*.

### **5.3.1 Black Art and Its Influence in the Achievement of Equality for African Americans**

The influences of the Black Arts Renaissance are said to be both profound and far-reaching, they are reflected in the painting of Vincent Smith; the photography of Billy Abernathy; the architecture of Earl Coombs; the documentary films of William Greaves and St. Claire Bourne; the drama of Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Charles Fuller, Ntozake Shange, Woody King, Adriane Kennedy, and Richard Wesley; the novels of Toni Cade Bambara, John A. Williams, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, Margaret Walker, William Melvin Kelley, Paule Marshall, Nathan Heard, John O. Killens, Rosa Guy, and Toni Morrison; the acting of Barbara Ann Teer, Yusef Iman, Danny Glover, Lou Gossett, and Al Freeman; the music of Nina Simone, Max Roach, Milford Graves, Marion Brown, Sonny Murray, Abbey Lincoln, and Archie Shepp; and the poetry of Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, Haki Madhubuti, Jayne Cortez, Askia Muhammad Toure, Etheridge Knight, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Nikki Giovanni, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets.

With 'Black Power' and the philosophy of 'Black is beautiful', many young African Americans proudly embrace this 'new' identity that is not only rooted in ancient African cultures from which they came but also in their history as a people in America itself. With this new idea of the self, we see men and women in stately turbans, flowing patterned robes called 'danshiki' and 'afro' braids. Some of these young African Americans rejected their western names and took up African names in their place; for example, Leroi Jones became Amiri Baraka. Some took names with Arabic background; for example, Cassius Clay became Mohammed Ali; we also saw people like Elijah Mohammed and some of these people just took the alphabet of their last names; for instance, Malcolm X.

Black Power as a movement went beyond matters of mere personal identity and appearance. Schools and colleges across the nation were persuaded, sometimes under relentless and even violent pressure to offer special courses and in some cases to create entire departments devoted to black studies, including courses in literature, history, language and art of black people. By so doing, young black students started learning more about their race.

The creation of a new black image cut across the spectrum of life, from fashion to political thought, from literature to religion. By 1970, some 16 million African Americans belonged to various Christian bodies, but in an attempt to carry their growing feeling into spiritual realms, many moved away from a religion that embodied the white Christ and a white Madonna. Thus, they tended to seek emotional support as well as social solidarity in other religious bodies. One of such movements is the Black Muslims Movement, a sect based on Islamic faith. This body advocated for a separation of the races. There were other movements that tended to go back to ancient African indigenous religions; these movements held sacred many ancient gods; they went

on to spread the message of change. One of the leaders of such movements is Pastor Albert Cleage Jr. Of Detroit's Central United Church of Christ who led his congregation in worship of a black Messiah and spoke of blackness as a source of 'spiritual strength'.

The Black Arts Movement which began in 1964 with circles of writers, artists and activists spread far and wide to the extent that blacks worldwide began to tap of its beauty and pride. The day after the assassination of Malcolm X, on February 22, 1965, Amiri Baraka announced that he would establish the Harlem BARTS. The initial funding for the BARTS came from the proceeds of several of Baraka's plays and from benefit jazz concerts featuring such artists as Sun Ra and his Myth-Science Arkestra, Betty Carter, John Coltrane, Jimmy Garrison, Sonny Murray, Grachun Moncur, Virgil Jones, Marion Brown, and Archie Shepp. On May 1, 1965 the BARTS opened in a four-story Harlem brownstone at 109 West 130th Street. Playing jazz, Sun Ra's group—accompanied by Albert Ayler, Don Ayler, and Milford Graves—led a parade of writers and artists across 125th Street, waving the Black Arts flag—a black and gold banner with Afrocentric theater masks of comedy and tragedy. During an eight-week HARYOU-ACT funded summer programme for four hundred students, the BARTS set the standard for black studies: Harold Cruse taught African American history and culture; Larry Neal, Askia Muhammad Toure, and Max Stanford, political ideology; Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, Milford Graves, Cecil Taylor, and Archie Shepp, music; S. E. Anderson and Sonia Sanchez, reading, writing and math; Amiri Baraka, A. B. Spellman, Charles Patterson, Lonnie Elders, Adrieene Kennedy, and Douglas Turner Ward, playwriting; Robert Hooks, Lou Gossett, Al Freeman, and Barbara Ann Teer, acting; Minnie Marshall, Sandra Lein, Ella Thompson, Marguerite Delain, and Barbara

Alston, dance; Leroy McLucas, filmmaking; and Joe Overstreet, Edward Spriggs, and Vincent Smith, painting, drawing, graphics and art history.

The BARTS in this stead marked a turning point in African American culture, emphasizing black consciousness, self-determination and Cultural Revolution against white racism. In solidarity with Black Power, the Harlem BARTS experiment inspired the development of a national Black Arts Movement, which made an indelible contribution to the direction of African American culture and consciousness. As poets like Haki Madhubuti insisted on “the integration of light and dark Black people,” it delivered a devastating blow to the longstanding prestige of the color caste system in black America. And, challenging the hegemony of white cultural critics and entertainment markets over their work, the young artists declared that their audience and critics were to be found in the African American community. Indeed, Larry Neal declared the centrality of a “Black Aesthetic” in the creation and judgment of African American works of art. The Black Arts movement spread quickly through conventions, festivals and cultural centers throughout the country. The first national Black Arts Conventions were held in Detroit in 1966 and 1967.

The Black Arts movement is said to have inspired the establishment of some eight hundred black theaters and cultural centers in the United States where writers and artists in dozens of cities assembled to fashion alternative institutions modeled after the Harlem BARTS. A lot of new Black Arts and black studies journals were established to provide vital forums for the development of a new generation of writers and artists.

(Culled from *The Black Power Movement* edited by John H. Bracey Jr and Sharon Harley. 2001: vi-viii)

In the Black Arts movement, it is essential to note several important figures. Fannie Lou Hamer, co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, was an “unschooled” leader in the Black Arts Movement. Prominent and powerful poets Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, and Quincy Troupe found expressive poetry as the best way to communicate a political message to an African American audience (1837-1838). While these key figures helped ignite the poetic flame, average, everyday Americans spread the message, as “Black poetry ... was adopted by elementary school students, university professors, working wives and mothers, community activists, prison inmates, barber shop aficionados, athletes” it

was that a black man in America must strive harder than a white man to get to the top of his career.

The poet Baraka was a prominent figure of this era using his poetry and drama to mirror the plight of the Negro in America while Henry Dumas used fiction to spread the message for a newly invigorated identity, placing major emphasis on retaining African cultural roots within the black American community, perhaps the reason why we have the term today, African American which incorporated the dual identities DuBois mentioned in his *Souls of Black Folk*.

Thus, one way to distinguish the Black Arts Movement from African American artistic and literary production before 1960 was to turn to the various orientations these works have toward both Africa and America. Before 1960, black artists were not focused on Africa as a place of origin, but after the revolution, it became imperative to look up to Africa for definition. Many black authors, such as Ellison, wanted to imitate and surpass Western (white) artistic models that already existed but after 1960, black artists wanted an original aesthetic that emphasized black personhood as different from that of white personhood. Africa often served as the source of inspiration for these artists. With this insight, African Americans celebrated “Afrocentricity” by showing African pride through poetry, drama, and fiction, as well as through traditional African clothing like ‘kente’ and Afro hairstyles

During the Black Arts Movement, writers recuperated the indigenous language of the black community; they celebrated their unique speech which had hitherto been considered inferior; they rose to the challenge of celebrating what is uniquely black with its root in African languages and cultures. Writers, such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright Zora Neale Hurston and very many others, very much like their artistic ancestors, wrote in black indigenous language and

developed themes of spiritual and political liberation, the leading voices of the Black Arts Movement were interested in building a black audience, not in dancing to the tunes of a white audience. They found support in the proliferation of new publishing companies and periodicals that focused on the black experience. The Black Arts Movement was also strengthened by the advent of black studies in American universities.

The Black Art Movement had its own peculiar problems, but that notwithstanding, they prevailed through relentless efforts to prove that they were not merely white Americans in blackface, proclaiming white American ideals.

#### 5.4 CONCLUSION

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be *judged* by the color of their skin, but by the *content* of their character. ...When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every *village* and every *hamlet*, from every state and every city, we will be able to *speed up* that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and *Gentiles*, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to *join* hands and sing in the words of the old Negro *spiritual*. Free at last! Free at last! Thank God *Almighty*, we are free at last. (From the speech "I Have a Dream," by Martin Luther King, Jr., on August 28, 1963, at the height of the civil rights movement. This is a monumental speech in African American history)

The movement for full equality for African Americans gained full momentum during the years preceding and after World War II. President Truman instituted a committee on civil rights composed of 15 distinguished African Americans and white Americans. The committee was asked to review the existing laws. After an exhaustive enquiry, the committee submitted the report to the president in 1947 stating that it had *surveyed the flaws in the nation's records and found them to be serious* and concluded with *we believe that the time for action is now*. The committee recommended among other things that:

1. A permanent committee on civil rights issues be instituted
2. There should be a strengthening of existing laws and the enactment of new ones to protect the civil rights of all persons,
3. There should the passage of laws protecting all citizens who sought to vote
4. There should be passage of a law against police brutality and related crimes.

The committee denounced segregation laws in all their ramifications and called for their repeal. With this, President Truman in 1948 issued an executive order declaring that *there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in all armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.*

And the Black Arts Movement that came out of the turbulent 1960s when social commotion existed both at home and abroad did well to promote the course of the black man in America.. On the one hand were the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power agitation, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and Malcolm X. On the other hand, the Vietnam War and problems with Cuba. Hence, a lot happened to move writers into action. There is perhaps no better example of this action in black literature than these lines from Amiri Baraka's signature poem, "Black Art" (1969): "We want 'poems that kill.' Assassin poems, Poems that shoot" (ll. 19-20). The Black Arts Movement set the tone for a new era in the lives of many African Americans. For this purpose we see that the main aim for African American writers was to write literature that enthroned blackness, because at this point, we see that writers turned their pens into swords to portray the injustices against the African American race and called for African Americans to unite as a strong force against white supremacy.

## **5.5 SUMMARY**

‘Black Power’, as well as the Civil Rights movement, did not want to see the proponents of any racist ideology have undue control over the lives of any racial groups; so they advocated sharing of power that belonged to all Americans with Americans who happen to be black. The resulting ‘black’ power should then be no more than shared power which is what democracy is all about. With this line of reasoning, Civil Right Movement, black power and their offshoot artistic ‘black art’ were able to transform responsibility into a kind of action that benefited all Americans.

African Americans want to be responsible citizens of America, having full participation in plans and decisions that affect them as Americans because when power that belongs to all is shared by all concerned, it will lose its implications of colour for in reality, power has no colour.

‘Black Power’ which probably was first used by DuBois in his writings has become a rallying cry for contemporary Africa Americans.

## **5.6 TUTORED-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- Discuss the Black Art Movement and its significance to the over-all emancipation of Negroes in America.
- Explain the relevance of ‘looking back to’ (being nostalgic, meditating on and drawing strength from) Africa during this significant movement in American history.

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**Some of the information in the unit are extracted from Gloria Gibbons, Anthony Norris, Brian on Civil Rights Movement**

### **MODULE 3 RECENT HISTORY AND CRITIQUES**

Having taken a journey into the origins and history of African American literature, its growth and symbiotic relationship with the history of the black people in America, a look at the recent history of this literature is necessary. Having survived slavery, racism and different forms of marginalisation, how have African American writers fared in recent times? Basically, this is the question the units in this module will attend to.

The module is broken into the following six units, each tackling a different aspect of the African American literary history and critiques in the not too distant past:

Unit 1: (Re)membering the Black History: Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Unit 2: Female and Feminist Writings: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Ntozake Shange

Unit 3: African American Literature in the Twenty-first Century

Unit 4: The Place of African American Literature and the African American in the American Dream

Unit 5: Exploring the African American Culture through African American Literature

Unit 6: African American Literature as Literature of "Otherness"

## **UNIT 1: (RE)MEMBERING THE BLACK HISTORY: ALEX HALEY'S *ROOTS: THE SAGA OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY* AND *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X***

### **CONTENTS**

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Objectives

1.3 Main Contents

1.3.1 *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

1.4 Conclusion

1.5 Summary

1.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment

1.7 References/Further Reading

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me. -- Muhammad Ali (born 1942), *The Greatest* (1975)

The common goal of 22 million Afro-Americans is respect as human beings, the God-given right to be a human being. Our common goal is to obtain the human rights that America has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored. We will never be recognized as citizens there until we are first recognized as humans. -- Malcolm X "Racism: the Cancer that is Destroying America", in *Egyptian Gazette* (August 25, 1964).

Alex Haley was born Alexander Murray Palmer Haley in Ithaca, New York on August 11, 1921.

He began his writing career as a senior editor for *Reader's Digest* shortly after retiring from the Coast Guard in 1959. He conducted the very first interview for *Playboy* magazine, which was with jazz legend Miles Davis. Another one of Haley's historical interviews for Hugh Hefner's groundbreaking publication was with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which was the longest interview King had ever granted to any publication. Haley's first, and perhaps most widely read writings, was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Published in 1965; this timeless autobiography

of one of the most influential people in history, comprised over 50 in-depth interviews with the controversial civil rights champion between 1963 and his assassination in 1965. Haley's most widely recognised work is *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, a novel turned television mini-series, which reached a record breaking 130 million viewers and sparked an increased public interest in family genealogy. Haley died in 1992 in Seattle Washington.

One of the most important books and television series ever to appear at the turn of the century as we know is Haley's *Roots*. This is a book that helped to galvanise the nation, and created an extraordinary political, racial, social and cultural dialogue that had never been seen since the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The book at the time of first appearance was an instant hit among readers and critics alike, and it sold over one million copies in the first year, and the mini-series that was created out of it was watched by an astonishing 130 million people. The book also won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

*Roots* opened up the minds of Americans of all colours and faiths to one of the darkest and most painful parts of America's past, the slave period. The book has not always been accepted by all as it has attracted controversies, especially its treatment of the issue of race and the institution of slavery. Some of the criticisms result from whether *Roots* is fact or fiction and whether Alex Haley confused these two issues, a subject he addresses directly in the book. There is also the fact that Haley was sued for plagiarism when it was discovered that several dozen paragraphs in *Roots* were taken directly from a novel, *The African*, by Harold Courlander, who ultimately received a substantial financial settlement at the end of the case. But none of the controversies affects the basic issue the book addressed.

*Roots* is known to have created a unique dialogue about not just the past, but the American society of the 1970s and how America had fared since the days portrayed in *Roots*.

## 1.2 OBJECTIVES

- a. To recognise the influential African Americans and their roles in history, science, literature, politics, pop culture, sports, and more.
- b. To break racial barriers by demonstrating those that had to be broken and how others succeeded because of hard work, education, and drive, not the color of their skin.
- c. To help students develop an interest in the study of African American history and the civil rights movement.
- d. To create an awareness of the need for social justice by gathering a variety of perspectives.

## 1.3 MAIN CONTENTS



Haley's boyhood home in Henning, Tennessee (2007)

Haley's awards and decorations from the Coast Guard include the Coast Guard Good Conduct Medal (with 1 silver and 1 bronze service star), American Defense Service Medal (with "Sea" clasp), American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, European-African-Middle

Eastern Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Korean Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal, United Nations Service Medal, and the Coast Guard Expert Marksmanship Medal. Additionally, he was awarded the War Service Medal by the Republic of Korea ten years after his death.

Haley also interviewed Muhammad Ali, who spoke about changing his name from Cassius Clay. Other interviews include Jack Ruby's defence attorney Melvin Belli, Sammy Davis, Jr., Jim Brown, Johnny Carson, and Quincy Jones.

### **1.3.1 *The Autobiography of Malcolm X and Roots: The Saga of an American Family***

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published in 1965, and it is Haley's first book. The book describes the trajectory of Malcolm X's life from street criminal to national spokesman for the Nation of Islam to his conversion to Sunni Islam. It also outlines Malcolm X's philosophy of black pride, Black Nationalism, and pan-Africanism. Haley wrote an epilogue to the book summarizing the end of Malcolm X's life, including his assassination in New York's Audubon Ballroom.

Haley ghost wrote *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* based on more than 50 in-depth interviews he conducted with Malcolm X between 1963 and Malcolm X's February 1965 assassination. The two men first met in 1960 when Haley wrote an article about the Nation of Islam for *Reader's Digest*. They met again when Haley interviewed Malcolm X for *Playboy*.

The first interviews for the autobiography frustrated Haley. Rather than discussing his own life, Malcolm X spoke about Elijah Muhammed the leader of the Nation of Islam; he became angry about Haley's reminders that the book was supposed to be about Malcolm X, not Muhammad or

the Nation of Islam. After several meetings Haley asked Malcolm X to tell him something about his mother. The request began the process of Malcolm X's describing his life story.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has been a consistent best-seller since its 1965 publication. *The New York Times* reported that six million copies of the book had been sold by 1977. In 1998, *Time* named *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* one of the ten most influential non-fiction books of the 20th century.

In 1966, Haley received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Alex Haley wrote his only screenplay, *Super Fly T.N.T.* The film starred and was directed by Ron O'Neal.

In 1976, Haley published *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, a novel based on his family's history, starting with the story of Kunta Kinte, who was kidnapped in the Gambia in 1767 and transported to the Province of Maryland to be sold as a slave. Haley claimed to be a seventh-generation descendant of Kunta Kinte, and Haley's work on the novel involved ten years of research, intercontinental travel and writing. He went to the village of Juffure, where Kunta Kinte grew up and which is still in existence, and listened to an indigenous historian tell the story of Kinte's capture. Haley also traced the records of the ship, *The Lord Ligonier*, which he said carried his ancestor to America.

Haley has stated that the most emotional moment of his life occurred on September 29, 1967, when he stood at the site in Annapolis, Maryland, where his ancestor had arrived from Africa in chains exactly 200 years before. A memorial depicting Haley reading a story to young children gathered at his feet has since been erected in the centre of Annapolis. *Roots* has been published in 37 languages, and Haley won a special Pulitzer Prize for the work in 1977. The same



year, *Roots* was adapted into a popular television mini-series by ABC. The serial reached a record-breaking 130 million viewers. The work emphasised that African Americans have a long history and that not all of that history is necessarily lost, as many believed. Its popularity also sparked an increased public interest in genealogy. In 1979, ABC aired the sequel mini-series *Roots: The Next Generations*, which continued the story of Kunta Kinte's descendants, concluding with Haley's arrival in Juffure.

Haley was briefly a "writer in residence" at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, where he began work on *Roots* and he spent time at a local bistro called "The Savoy" in Rome, New York, where he would sometimes pass the time listening to the piano player. Today, there is a special table in honor of Haley with a painting of Haley writing *Roots* on a yellow legal tablet.



Historical marker in front of Alex Haley's boyhood home in Henning, Tennessee (2007)



Haley's grave beside his boyhood home in Henning, Tennessee (2010)



USCGC *Alex Haley* (WMEC-39)

In the late 1970s, Haley began working on a second historical novel based on another branch of his family, traced through his grandmother Queen—the daughter of a black slave woman and her white master. Haley died in Seattle, Washington, of a heart attack and was buried beside his childhood home in Henning, Tennessee, with the story unfinished. At his request, it was finished by David Stevens and was published as Alex Haley's *Queen*. It was subsequently made into a movie in 1993.



Alex Haley is seen as an unlikely hero who without any formal training in history, not even a college degree, wrote two bestsellers that more than any other books written about the United

States in the twentieth century changed the public conversation about race. Haley was not a particularly good historian, but he attempted what looked like an epic story about his own side of the story of every African American. He became a good storyteller in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and the stories he told resonated with millions of people.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska. His family moved to Michigan where they continued to experience persecution and violence. White people murdered Malcolm's father and forced his mother into a mental hospital. After living in a Michigan detention home and completing the eighth grade, Malcolm moved to Boston, Massachusetts, to live with his half-sister, Ella. In Boston, Malcolm became involved in urban nightlife. He passed for being much older than he was, wearing flashy clothes, gambling, drinking, doing drugs, and dating an older white woman, Sophia. He eventually took a job as a railway porter. He then moved to New York, where he began working as a hustler in Harlem. His various jobs there included running numbers, selling drugs, and steering white people to black brothels. He was also an armed robber.

Life in Harlem became very dangerous and so Malcolm returned to Boston, where he became a house burglar and was eventually arrested. In prison, Malcolm transformed himself, converting to the branch of Islam promoted by the Nation of Islam, which had already converted a number of Malcolm's siblings. He was inspired by the faith and so stopped using drugs; he read voraciously, prayed, studied English and Latin, and joined the prison debate team. He was later released on parole; so he moved in with his brother, Wilfred, and became very active in the Detroit temple of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm received permission to drop his last name, which a white slave owner gave to one of his ancestors. He then adopted the placeholder "X" as his last

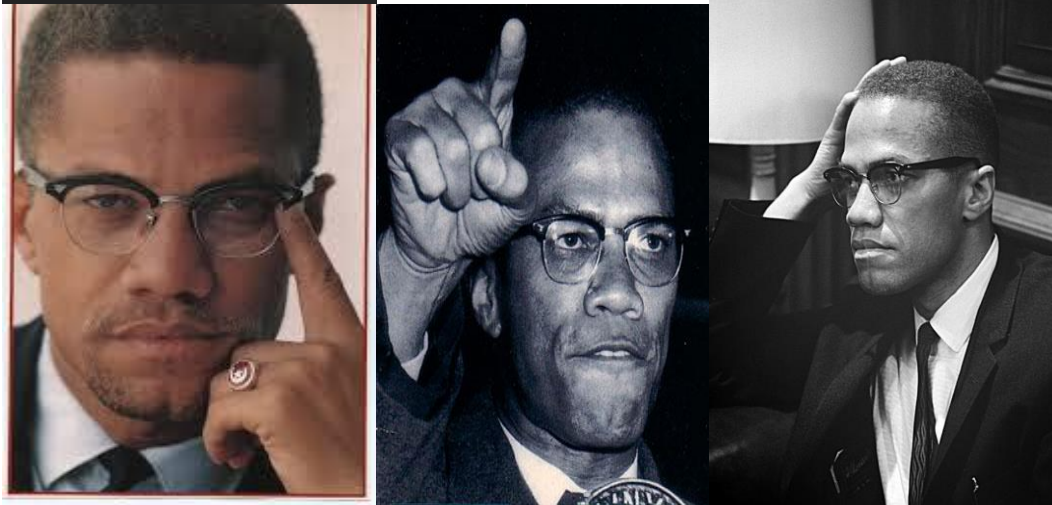
name, using the letter to represent the lost name of his African ancestors. Malcolm X soon met the Nation of Islam's leader, Elijah Muhammad, and rose quickly from the rank of temple assistant in Detroit to the Nation's first national minister. Malcolm X became known throughout the United States, even outside of Muslim circles, as a fiery advocate for black unity and militancy. The Nation of Islam's leaders resented and feared Malcolm despite his allegiance to their cause, and they suspended him from the organisation.

The Nation of Islam's frustration with Malcolm intensified, and Malcolm began receiving death threats. After a divisive argument with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm left the Nation of Islam and he used his fame to found his own organisation, Muslim Mosque, Inc. He saw his organisation as more politically active than the Nation of Islam. On a trip to the Middle East and Africa, Malcolm discovered what he saw as true Islam. This version of Islam contrasted with the version of Islam he had been teaching. By the end of his life, Malcolm X was an international figure, welcomed by foreign leaders and committed to Islam as a religion that can alleviate the racial problems of the United States. He was assassinated in 1965.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm focused on how racism against blacks dehumanised them. The white people around Malcolm often viewed him as something less than human, and Malcolm's desire to correct this perception drove his fight for racial equality. He experienced subtle racism in his youth from his family and school, who treated him differently from others because he was black. Though his foster parents and some of the people he encountered in school were nice to him, Malcolm thought these people treated him nicely in order to show how unprejudiced they were. He felt that they were using him because he was different, as though he were a "pink poodle." Malcolm in turn dehumanised certain white people

as revenge for his own subjugation. In Boston, he displayed his white girlfriend, Sophia, as a status symbol, viewing her less as a person than as an enviable object that he owned.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, characters often associated with other people just to be seen with them, treating them like objects rather than human beings. The autobiography pointed out this habit to show how society's hierarchy of status determined their identities and sense of self-worth. Malcolm first experienced this hierarchy when he got special treatment from his father because he was the lightest-skinned of his siblings. His father's preferential treatment illustrated how Malcolm's superficial traits, rather than his personality, gave him priority within the hierarchy of his family. When Malcolm's Michigan foster family treated him as special and his school elected him class president, Malcolm was at first proud but later resentful of being a "mascot" for white ideals of how blacks should behave. Neither his school nor his foster family recognised Malcolm as a person. Rather, they used his skin colour to demonstrate their apparent tolerance and broadmindedness, and thereby gain status for themselves. Later, Elijah Muhammad used Malcolm X as a symbol of the Nation of Islam's vitality as well as a strategic resource in growing his organisation. In each case, a person is degraded to the status of an object in the service of someone else's social advancement.



**The many faces of Malcolm X**

## **1.4 CONCLUSION**

‘Once upon a time in my younger years and in the dawn of this century, I wrote: the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line’ (W. E. B. DuBois in *The New Negroes*, 1927. P385).

This was a prominent issue at the time, and it is still a very crucial issue today in the 21st century where the fruit of bitter rivalries of economic imperialism, the root of that catastrophe, were in Africa, and the problem is still that of the colour line. The legacy left, the problems of the world inherits even a century after holds the same fatal seed for the world today because the catastrophe still lurks in the unresolved problems of race relations.

## **1.5 SUMMARY**

“There is a regrettable tendency to turn our heroes into icons and to take away some of the legitimate activities that were part of their personal and political biography, to freeze them at a stage in their development.”  
—**Manning Marable, 1992**

From the foregoing, we have got a peep into the life and work of Malcolm X; we have been able to explore the ideological and political development of Malcolm X through primary and secondary documents, and we have been able to identify the various personal, social, and political factors that influenced Malcolm X's leadership and equally understand the opposing philosophies and tactics of King and X, as well as areas in which their ideas converged and from these, we know that Malcolm X is seen as one of the greatest and most influential African Americans in history. He is credited with raising the self-esteem of African Americans and reconnecting them with their African heritage. He is largely known to be responsible for the spread of Islam in the black community in the United States and many African Americans today, especially those who lived in cities in the Northern and Western United States, felt that Malcolm X articulated their complaints concerning inequality better than the mainstream civil rights movement did as he made clear the price that white America would have to pay if it did not accede to black America's legitimate demands, and with these achievements, he is considered one of the greatest African Americans of the 20th century.

## **1.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- How does Malcolm X's understanding of racial identity change over the course of his life? Consider the different phases of Malcolm's life.
- What is Malcolm X's perspective on white people's change over the course of his life, and why?
- What role do women play in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*?

- Why does Malcolm X go into the details of his early life in Michigan, Boston, and New York?
- How do the lessons and skills of Malcolm's life on the street influence his character as a political leader?
- What, in Malcolm's experiences, draws him to an activism more militant than the non-violent activism of Martin Luther King, Jr.?
- What does Malcolm X mean when he says, "You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself." What experiences led him to make this statement?

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## **UNIT 2: FEMALE AND FEMINIST WRITINGS: ALICE WALKER, TONI MORRISON, MAYA ANGELOU AND NTOZAKE SHANGE**

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2.1 Introduction

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2.4 Conclusion

2.5 Summary

2.6 Tutor-Marked Assignments

2.7 References/Further Reading

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression.... I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels; her emotion had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought about an art that would be born, an art that would the way for women the like of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that

day.... I sang with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise song. Jean Toomer, 1923.

Feminism is the organised movement which promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social spheres. Feminists believe that women are oppressed simply because of their sex which is based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Ridding society of patriarchy will result in liberation for women, men, minorities, and gays.

Patriarchy, in turn, is the system which oppresses women through its social, economic and political institutions. Throughout history men have had greater power in both the public and private spheres. To maintain this power, men have created boundaries and obstacles for women, thus making it harder for women to hold power. There is an unequal access to power. Patriarchy also includes the oppression of minorities and homosexuals.

Feminism as an ideology has taken different forms over the years. In the 1970's, women started developing a theory which helped to explain their oppression. Pockets of resistance began to organise and challenge patriarchy. By the 1980's, however, feminists started disagreeing on particular issues linked to feminism. What was once one theory began to branch out into many theories that focused on different feminist issues. Today, there are as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists. Each definition of feminism depends on a number of factors including one's own beliefs, history and culture.

## **2.2 OBJECTIVES**

- a. To outline the issues of women and writers in African American literature
- b. To examine the presentation of women in fiction written by African American writers
- c. To trace the development of an African American feminist criticism.

- d. To investigate the development of the canon of African American women writers
- e. The examination of stereotyped images of women in African American literature
- f. The study of African American women writers and the development of an African American female aesthetic, and the examination of women and the oral tradition
- g. Examine the term "feminist" and discuss womanist theory

## **2.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

### **2.3.1 Female and Feminist Writings**

Feminism in the United States did not emerge from the women who are most victimised by sexist oppression; it did not come from women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Feminism did not originate from women who are powerless to change their condition in life because they are a silent majority. These categories of women have come to accept their condition as their lot in life without visible question, without organised protest, without collective anger or rage. The work of a pioneer, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is still heralded as having paved the way for contemporary feminist movement, but the work was written as if these women did not exist. Friedan's famous phrase, "the problem that has no name," often quoted to describe the condition of women in the society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women-housewives bored with leisure, with the 'doll house' built around them, with the home, with children, with buying products, women who wanted more from life. Their collective boredom is recollected in Friedan first chapter where she states that: 'We can no longer ignore that voice

within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my house'. It is that "more" these women wanted and the more basically are careers.

Of course, Friedan did not talk about who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labour and given equal access with white men to be professionals. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, women without children, women without homes and disabled women. She did not specifically refer to the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, or whether to be a leisure class housewife. She made her own plight and that of other high-class white women synonymous with a condition affecting all American women. In so doing, she is said to have deflected attention away from the main import of her work.

Friedan says that:

It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or "I" without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive. For women of ability, in America today, I am convinced that there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous

From the time the women's liberation movement began, individual black women went to different groups. Many never returned after a first meeting. Anita Cornwall (1979:471) is correct in "Three for the Price of One: Notes from a Gay Black Feminist," when she states, "sadly enough, fear of encountering racism seems to be one of the main reasons that so many black women refuse to join the women's movement". Of late, focus on the issue of racism has generated discourse but has had little impact on the behaviour of white feminists towards black

women because white women make black women the "objects" of their privileged discourse on race and as "objects", black women remain un-equals, inferiors. Some of these women place themselves in the position of "authorities" who must mediate communication between racist white women and angry black women whom they believe are incapable of rational discourse. Of course, the systems of racism, classism, and educational elitism remain intact if they are to maintain their authoritative positions.

Lillian Hellman (1973) in her autobiographical work *Pentimento* writes, "All my life, beginning at birth, I have taken orders from black women, wanting them and resenting them, being superstitious the few times I disobeyed". Black women as described in Hellman's text worked in her household as family servants, and their status was never that of an equal. Even as a child, she was always in the dominant position as they questioned, advised, or guided her; they were free to exercise these rights because she or another white authority figure allowed it. Feminist analyses of women's lot has always focused on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to construct feminist theory. For this reason, it has been easier for women who do not experience race or class oppression to focus exclusively on gender.

White women and black men have been said to have it both ways. They can act as oppressors or be the oppressed. Both groups have led liberation movements that favour their interests and support the continued oppression of other groups. Black male sexism has undermined struggles to eradicate racism just as white female racism undermines feminist struggle. And as long as these two groups or any group defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling class, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others.

Leah Fritz says, in her *Dreamers and Dealers*, a discussion of the current women's movement published in 1979, that:

Women's suffering under sexist tyranny is a common bond among all women, transcending the particulars of the different forms that tyranny takes. Suffering cannot be measured and compared quantitatively. Is the enforced idleness and vacuity of a "rich" woman, which leads her to madness and/or suicide, greater or less than the suffering of a poor woman who barely survives on welfare but retains some-how her spirit? There is no way to measure such difference, but should these two women survey each other without the screen of patriarchal class, they may find a commonality in the fact that they are both oppressed, both miserable.

Fritz's statement demonstrates the conscious mystification of the social divisions between women that characterised most of feminist expressions. While it is evident that many women suffer from sexist tyranny, there is little indication that this forges *a common bond among all women*. But a central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that *all women are oppressed*; this implies that women share a common lot: that factors like class, race, religion, and sexual preference do not create a diversity of experiences that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women.

Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalised in black community as it is in other communities around the world, but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society. What being oppressed means is 'the absence of choices' because this is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor, and many women in black community may be said to have choices. However, exploitation and discrimination are still words that more accurately describe the lot of women in black community in the United States even today.

The question is: should the situation the woman finds herself in in the black community be blamed entirely on the black man? No! The woman should take part of the blame because she has allowed herself to be defined, described, analysed, explained and directed, and realities which were supposed to be entirely the woman's personal property could also be under the control of the man, and this control as far as feminist criticism is concerned is effected primarily through the man's control of social institutions that determine behaviour. The woman's acceptance of the subordinate position in society has not helped the woman much as she is still kept in bondage which Karenga (1975:23) says is "a systematic restriction of growth and freedom of choice". A struggle out of this bondage and slavish condition is extremely difficult particularly for the black woman because trying to relieve herself of this condition would be taken to mean that she is revolting against constituted authority; it will be seen as a fight between husband and wife, father and mother, sister and brother. But in spite of this reasoning, feminists feel that there is an urgent need for the black woman to free herself from this bondage for as Walker and Lorde quoted by Christian (1983:161) see it, "women are central to their own survival and their freedom even if they own a heritage defined through age long indigenous patriarchal systems". The question is what exactly is freedom to the black woman? To answer the question, we explore different angles to the issue of race, class and gender.

To start with, freedom to the black woman entails refusal to be defamed and abused. Freedom means to take possession of her body and glory in its power, to desire something to make, to achieve and something genuine to give. Freedom means to be free from guilt and shame, from constant want and disease, from oppressive norms and values that have nothing good to offer the black woman. Freedom means to begin to take control of oneself and not be controlled; it means claiming the masculine virtues of courage. Freedom to the black woman means equality of



opportunity, it means old processes must give way to new ones, it means women are completely free from the fetters of possession, domination and exploitation. Freedom means that the black woman is free to define her female being, to direct the rites, events, progress of her life and experience. Freedom to the black woman entails caring for one another as postulated by Alice Walker in her theory, 'Womanism'. Freedom means being proud of oneself, taking care of oneself and glory in womanhood. Freedom entails contributing whole-heartedly and equally with men to civilisation. Freedom means strength, intelligence, temperance, courage, principle and honour to the woman. Freedom means healthy living, excellence and independence to the black woman and these are the ideals preached and propagated by the following black women writers. Black female writers see their society as crippled. They recognise the God-given roles of women but frown at the society using the roles as weapon against women.

**2.3.2 Alice Walker** sees her sisters all over the world as burdened by the anguish of a life akin to that of a 'mule'. She had seen the black woman as a victim, but today, instead of lamenting the lot of women, she brings into focus the positive sides of women; her concern today is on the experience of her women folks. This is reflected in her novel, *The Color Purple*, where Celie is abused and raped by her Pa, who takes away her children when they are born. Eventually, Pa married Celie off to a man who is just as abusive as himself. Celie's new husband, Mr. simply married Celie to take care of his four children, look after his house, and work in his fields.

Celie is somewhat happy to marry Mr. because she can now remove her younger sister, Nettie, from Pa's household. However, after Nettie lives in Mr.'s household for a time without encouraging his sexual advances, Mr. kicks Nettie out. Though Nettie promises to write to her sister, Celie does not hear from her. Celie's life gets worse as she becomes separated from the

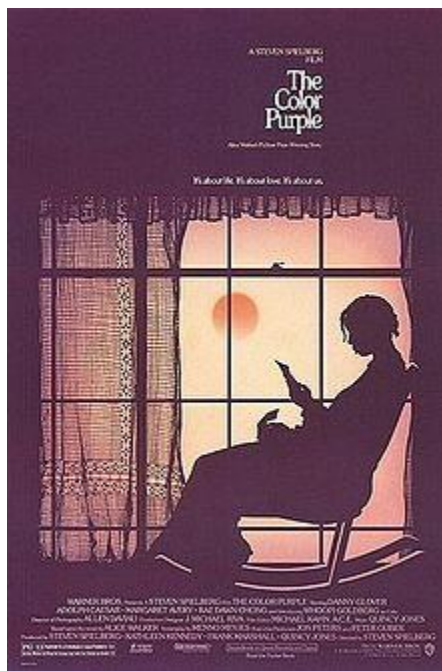
only person in the world she loved and who loved her back. Celie's life changed when Mr. brought his mistress home for Celie to nurse back to health. Mr's mistress, Shug, is everything that Celie is not: sexy, sassy, and independent. Celie again falls in love with Shug. For the first time in Celie's life, she has a chance to enjoy sex, romance, and friendship. Celie discovers the mystery of Nettie's silence for so many decades: Mr. had been hiding all of Nettie's letters in his locked trunk. When Celie finds her sister's letters, it unlocked a new world for her. Instead of being submissive and downtrodden, she realises the full extent of the abuses she had suffered from Mr.. This singular act gave Celie inner strength, the will power to leave him. Celie learnt that Pa is not actually her biological father. Celie also learnt that Nettie is living with the Reverend Samuel and his family, working as a missionary in Africa. The Reverend Samuel had also adopted Celie's two children from Pa many years back. Nettie, Samuel, and the children planned to return from Africa soon. Celie at this juncture learnt that Pa had died. She also finds out that the house that Pa lived in actually had belonged to Celie and Nettie since their mother passed away. So now Celie owns a home, which she prepared for Nettie's arrival. Now an independent woman, Celie remains close friends with Shug, although Shug is not faithful or constant in their romantic relationship. Celie also gains a new friend.

After several years in Africa, Nettie returns with Samuel, who is now her husband, and with Celie's two children. The sisters have a blissful reunion, and although they are now old women, they can be said to be happy, and they have just begun the best years of their lives.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is one of many novels presenting the view and idea that the woman can possess a voice. The work goes beyond sexism, racism and homophobia, and is undoubtedly Walker's most popular novel because it has influenced millions of people throughout the world. Critics stated that *The Color Purple* is an example of a "woman's novel"

because it carries an identified tradition of women's writing in terms of narrative strategy, themes and voice. *The Color Purple* is said to be a good representation of the acquisition of the voice to break out from any oppression that is based on gender differences.

*The Color Purple* was published in 1982 and since then has continued to generate the most public attention as a book and as a major motion picture. *The Color Purple* has been made into a major motion picture, directed by Steven Spielberg, in 1985.



Chronicle / Liz Hafalia Alice Walker

### 2.3.3 Toni Morrison



Toni Morrison

**Toni Morrison** is an African American writer who has for years helped promote Black literature and authors, especially when she worked as an editor for Random House in the 1960s and 70s, where she edited books by such authors as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones. Morrison herself later became one of the most important African American writers of the 20th century. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. Among her most famous novels is *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. The story describes a slave who found freedom but

killed her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery. Another important novel is *Song of Solomon*, a tale about materialism, unrequited love, and brotherhood. Morrison is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, dwells on a slave's life. It talks about whippings, rape, hard work, and escape. However, while portraying this historical story of enslavement and black culture, Morrison also tells the personal tales of a few very strong female slaves. In this novel, Morrison focuses mainly on the female characters, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Beloved, and their relationships. If Ayda Rahmani defines feminism as referring to “women and issues related to them...a critique of patriarchy...equality of men and women, women’s rights and their improvement” (Rahmani, 2015:62), *Beloved* in this case can be seen as a feminist novel. Even though the novel mirrors the story of many slaves, because of its focus on the proactive and independent women in the novel, it can be said to have made a feminist statement.

Sethe is the protagonist of the novel. She lived as a slave at Sweet Home, a plantation, and decides to escape. Sethe had sent her three children, two boys and a girl, ahead to Cincinnati to be taken care of by her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Eventually, Sethe escapes and makes it to Cincinnati after which some of the people from the plantation arrive in Cincinnati to take Sethe and her children back to the plantation. Instead of allowing that to happen, Sethe attempts to murder all of her children. She only succeeds in killing her daughter, who is later named "Beloved." To some, this act of murder is an act of compassion. In Sethe's eyes, she was keeping her daughter from the miserable life of slavery that she had to endure growing up. Sethe is an independent woman who is able to choose which man she wants to be with. She takes Paul D as her lover but does not marry him. Morrison is not suggesting that men are evil or to be

mistrusted. Rather, she dwells on the inhumanity of slavery and the horrors that were endured that are the true evil.

It was Barbara Christian in her *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, who points out that ‘a persistent and major theme throughout Afro-American women’s literature [is] our attempt to define and express our totality rather than being defined by others’. And this is what Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* did and as *Walker* puts it, the novel ‘speaks to me as no novel, past or present, has ever done’. That novel is only now receiving the wide reading and acclaim it deserves. In these writers’ view, Hurston was the pioneer in whose path black women writers of the ‘70s and ‘80s have followed. Though 45 years separate *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*, the two novels embody many similar concerns and methods, ones that characterize the black women’s literary tradition -- a tradition now in full flower through the work of such writers as Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde.

Born and raised in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, Hurston escaped the hurt that racism inflicts on many black children. She was nourished by a tradition of storytelling and expressive, colorful, metaphoric speech. Because she experienced both herself and her people as beautiful and powerful, Hurston was able to explore and celebrate black life on its own terms, not primarily in its relationship to white society. Free from the compulsion to concentrate on racism and oppression, she could as an anthropologist delight in collecting black folklore -- in *Mules and Men* -- and as a novelist focus on a young woman’s quest for identity and wholeness -- in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

That novel, a kind of "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Black Woman," depicts the process of a woman’s coming to consciousness, finding her voice and developing the power to tell her story.

This fresh and much-needed perspective was met with incomprehension by the male literary establishment. In his review in *New Masses*, Richard Wright said the novel lacked "a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation." Hurston's dialogue, he said, "manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes. . . The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought." (Richard Wright, *New Masses*, 5 October 1937:22-23) Many male reviewers and critics have reacted with similar hostility and incomprehension to *The Color Purple*. But to be blind to the definitions these and other women writers give to women's experience is to deny the validity of that experience.

For Hurston's heroine, Janie, self-discovery and self-definition consist of learning to recognise and trust her inner voice, while rejecting the formulations others try to impose upon her. Increasingly, she comes to validate "the kingdom of God within" and to refuse to be conformed to the world. Like the women in Walker's novels, Janie must find the ground of her being, a source of value and authority out of which to live. This problem is especially acute for black women; both writers seem to be saying, because the structures neither of society nor of formal religion provide this grounding. Janie finds it by being true to her own poetic, creative consciousness. In *The Color Purple* Walker's characters discover it through the strength and wisdom available in the community of women.

The ways of the world are represented for Janie by the views of her grandmother, Nanny and her first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. Nanny sees society as a hierarchy, with black women at the bottom. She tells Janie:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tub find out. Maybe it's some place off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de

nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see.

Though born into slavery, Nanny had *dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do*. She wanted to *preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for her*. She tries to fulfil her dreams first through her daughter and then through Janie. But slavery and years of dependence on a white family have warped Nanny's dream. She can think of no better way to protect Janie than marrying her to a middle-aged black farmer whose prosperity makes it unnecessary for him to use the girl as a "mule."

In her depiction of Janie's first two marriages, Hurston explores the role that sexism -- especially a sexism that blindly mimics white values -- plays in black women's oppression. When 16-year-old Janie refuses to be submissive and worshipful to the crude Killicks, he tries to break her spirit by reducing her to the level Nanny feared -- that of a beast of burden, who plows the fields at her master's command. Joe Starks wants to be "a big voice" in his all-black town; patterning himself after the white men he has observed bossing their communities. He gives Janie possessions and status, but assumes that her identity will come only from her role as his wife. He demands complete submission and keeps her aloof from the community, making her play the role of an idle woman to show off his prosperity and power. It is said that by uncritically copying white society's class system and materialism, as well as the sterile ideal of the turn-of-the-century white, southern lady, Starks only succeeds in killing both his marriage and, eventually, himself.

Despite her oppressive environment, Janie grows steadily in self-knowledge and discernment. She has the common sense of a poet who, in Wordsworth's phrase, *sees into the life of things*.



We see the image of a blossoming pear tree, buzzing with bees and dusting the world with pollen, and this becomes her image of her community and the metaphor for what marriage should be. The horizon to her represents the need to explore all the dimensions of life and of her own self and the result is to live *by comparison*. Janie's ability to know the difference between her inner life and outer life is demonstrated through powerful figurative language that characterizes Janie throughout the novel. Though she remains with Starks until his death, Janie increasingly trusts and articulates her own values. She finds happiness in her third marriage by rejecting the hierarchical, materialistic codes others have imposed on her. She gladly works in the fields with Tea Cake, who is younger and much poorer, because they do not like to be separated all day. With him she becomes part of the rich communal life of music-making and storytelling; she, too, becomes one of the 'big picture talkers using a side of the world for a canvas'. Also she is able to realise her full potentials in the union with Tea Cake.

Janie's experience teaches her that there are 'two things everybody's got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves'. For Janie, learning about living means going to the horizon of her consciousness and coming back with a lot to share with her women folks.

Zora Neale Hurston, like John the Baptist, was seen as a lone voice in the fight for women's emancipation at the time but happy today; there are several voices coming to take on the fight to eradicate women's silence and invariably tear the veil of invisibility, according to Aduke Adebayo.

**2.3.4 Maya Angelou** is another female voice that rose to champion the cause of women and over the years, several women have had to identify with Angelou's piece of writing. They have

had to connect with her poetry, particularly 'Phenomenal Woman' which is more like an anthem for women's pride in themselves.

### **Phenomenal Woman**

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I'm telling lies.  
I say,  
It's in the reach of my arms  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.

When I try to show them  
They say they still can't see.  
I say,  
It's in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I'm a woman

Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need of my care,  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

The poem was first published in 1978, and it is a poem and not an especially long one. “Phenomenal Woman” is an anthem of women's strength in their own womanhood. The poem has struck a chord with women everywhere. ‘Look at me!’ it says quite plainly. ‘I am beautiful in my strength, in whatever shape that is mine. In my womanhood.’ This is a celebration that all women know so well. Maya Angelou has been quoted as saying that she writes for, ‘the Black voice and for any ear which can hear it.’ In “Phenomenal Woman”, as with much of her writing, this is certainly true. Maya Angelou’s works are numerous and they include: *I Know Why the*

*Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas, The Heart of a Woman and All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.*

**2.3.5 Ntozake Shange** is a poet, a novelist, a playwright and high priestess of black bohemianism. She was born in 1948, and she and her sister, Ifa Bayeza, recently released the novel *Some Sing, Some Cry*. Her first and best-known play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, has been made into a feature film by Tyler Perry. Poet Ishmael Reed observes that 'No contemporary writer has Ms. Shange's uncanny gift for immersing herself within the situations and points-of-view of so many different types of women.'

Shange was born Paulette Williams in Trenton, New Jersey, on October 18, 1948. Her mother Eloise, an educator and social worker, and her father Paul, a sports physician, contributed to the rich intellectual environment surrounding Shange's childhood. Shange recalls when as a child, family friends often frequented their home; she recalls names like Dizzy Gillespie, Paul Robeson, Walter White, and W.E.B. Dubois. And she says: 'I used to sit up on the stairway in the front of the house and watch the people come in and I could listen to the talk going on in the back' (Interview with Brenda Lyons, 1986). During these same years, Shange and her sister attended poetry readings. Even at a young age, she began to analyse and critique the poetry she had heard. At one reading, Shange recalls the poetry of women who had formerly been raised in the South. She says: 'We were getting very upset by what, in our ignorance, we saw as their romanticization of Southern living. And I was saying to myself, if it was as wonderful as all that, why in the hell did you all come up here?' (Interview with Henry Blackwell)

Shange soon became aware of the limits placed on Blacks and women in society. She experienced racism and was constantly harassed by the other students. Seeing the reality at such an early age created a sense of displacement for Shange and she says: 'I started writing because there's an absence of things I was familiar with or that I dreamed about. One of my senses of anger is related to this vacancy - a yearning I had as a teenager. . .and when I get ready to write, I think I'm trying to fill that. . .' (Interview with Brenda Lyons, 1986). Her view of the life of the black woman made her fight against racism, oppressive norms in the society and especially against 'the politics of silence'. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*. . . altered the course of dramatic and dance history in America. She assumed the responsibility to discover the causes of the pain of black women and communicated these with honesty to everyone involved and as she put it: "It's like creating a world that's women-centered, so aberrant male forms really look aberrant" (Ntozake Shange speaking about her Stage Play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* in an interview with Brenda Lyons, 1986).



Ntozake Shange

**2.3.6 Audre Lorde** is another African American female writer; she calls herself a black feminist lesbian, mother, and poet simply because her identity is based on the relationship of

many divergent perspectives once perceived as incompatible. In her writings, she explores love, anger, fear, racial and sexual oppression, urban neglect, and personal survival. She anticipates a hope for a better humanity by revealing truth in her poetry. She states, "I feel I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often un-mitigating pain" (*Conversations with Audre Lorde*, 2004:89). Lorde continually explored the marginalization experienced by individuals in a society fearful of differences. She says that "imposed silence about any area of our lives is a tool for separation and powerlessness" (*The Cancer Journals*, 1980). She is at the forefront of black feminist thought, and her work has contributed to an analysis of the interlocking nature of all oppression. As activist and poet, she worked to challenge and transform power relations.

Audre Geraldine Lorde was born in New York City to labourer Frederic Byron and Linda Belmar Lorde, immigrants from the West Indies who had hoped to return until the depression dashed their plans. Lorde has written many books among which are *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From A Land Where Other People Live* (1973), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974) *Coal* (1976) *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *The Cancer Journals* (1980), *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), *A Burst of Light* (1988), *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986) *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New* (1992) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984) and others.



Audre Lorde

**2.3.7 Oprah Winfrey** is a talk show host, television producer, film actor/film actress, and philanthropist. Billionaire Oprah Winfrey is best known for hosting her own internationally popular talk show. She is quoted as saying: ‘The whole point of being alive is to evolve into the complete person you were intended to be’ (Opra.com, n.p.). Oprah is a media giant; she was born in the rural town of Kosciusko, Mississippi, on January 29, 1954. In 1976, Winfrey moved to Baltimore, where she hosted a hit television chat show, *People Are Talking*. She was later recruited by a Chicago TV station to host her own morning show. She later became the host of her own, wildly popular program, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which aired for 25 seasons, from 1986 to 2011. That same year, Winfrey launched her own TV network, the *Oprah Winfrey Network*.



Her success led to nationwide fame and a role in Steven Spielberg's 1985 film, *The Color Purple*, for which she was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. According to *Forbes Magazine*, Oprah was the richest African American of the 20th century and the world's only Black billionaire for three years running. *Life* magazine hailed her as the most influential woman of her generation. In 2005, *Business Week* named her the greatest Black philanthropist in American history. Oprah's Angel Network has raised more than \$51,000,000 for charitable programs, including girls' education in South Africa. Winfrey is a dedicated activist for children's rights. In 1994, President Clinton signed a bill into law that Winfrey had proposed to Congress, creating a nationwide database of convicted child abusers. She founded the Family for Better Lives foundation and also contributes to her alma mater, Tennessee State University.



In September 2002, Oprah was named the first recipient of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' Bob Hope Humanitarian Award. “Dr. (Martin Luther) King dreamed the dream. But we don't have to just dream the dream anymore”, Oprah told the crowd, “We get to vote that dream into reality by supporting a man who knows not just who we are, but who we can be”. In November 2013, Winfrey received the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. President Barack Obama gave her this award for her contributions to her country. (Oprah Gail Winfrey. (2014). The Biography.com website. Retrieved 05:26, Apr 23, 2014, from <http://www.biography.com/people/oprah-winfrey-9534419>)

## **2.4 CONCLUSION**

Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of spirits. (Arlene Elder, “Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo: Ntozake Shange’s Neo Slave/Blues Narrative”)

## **2.5 SUMMARY**

In black community where men have always controlled the conceptual arena and have always determined social values and the structure of institutions, it is not surprising that the black woman has lost the power of naming, explaining and defining herself. It is not also surprising that the masculine form remains generic and universal. In this community, also, the masculine form has also established itself as the ultimate and in literature, we have seen that the same trend prevails. However, as Showalter (1986:1) points out, “men are not born with the faculty for the universal and women are not reduced at birth to the particular”. Hence, for the black feminist, her concern is primarily with the secondary standing of the black woman in black community.

This standing to her is a form of victimisation; therefore, she believes that the position the black woman finds herself in is not entirely her doing but a position imposed on her not by her feminine characteristics but by strong environmental forces of education and social tradition which is under the purposeful control of black men.

In black community, the socialization process has rendered the black woman powerless, subservient and less ambitious than men, so the belief is that the black woman has been brain-washed into believing that she is only a complement, an adjunct and her man must assumed the position of the absolute being. But happily today, black women are constructing a different image of themselves by daring to believe in their ability to conquer the world and carve out a space for themselves in the scheme of things. Examples abound in African American literature, in sports, entertainment and business.

## **2.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- Examine the development of feminist consciousness in black community, especially in the United States of America.
- What are the basic tenets of this consciousness?
- Explore the issues raised by African American women writers from Phillis Wheatley to date.
- Discuss some of the female writers and their most feminist works that you know in relation to African American literature.

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## **UNIT 3: AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

### **CONTENTS**

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Main Content
  - 3.3.1 Twenty-First Century African American Literature
- 3.4 Conclusion
- 3.5 Summary
- 3.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 3.7 References/Further Reading

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

My father was a slave and my people died to build this country, and I'm going to stay right here and have a part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people like you will drive me from it. Is that clear? (Paul Robeson (1898-1976) testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, June 12, 1956)

The period from 1965 to the present is unique in a society like the United States of America in the sense that the society underwent such a large amount of change in so little time, especially in terms of development. Technological development was extremely rapid. Americans put a man on the moon a mere seventy years after inventing flight, and it was successful. America grew in leaps and bounds; she is the financial capital of the world and the internet boom allowed for information and ideas to be exchanged faster than ever before. In fact the world became flat as a result of the technological know-how. However, in spite of these outstanding developments, for much of the time period since 1965, the world had to live with the constant threat of a nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia; there is the battle for economic supremacy now between the US and China. There are threats here and there, especially fueled by the Palestinian and Israel tension which have caused a number of terrorist attacks on American soil. This put a strain on

society as a whole despite all the prosperity that was occurring. Such happenings were highly influential in the style of literature written during this time period.

## **3.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objectives are to:

- a. Trace how far African Americans have come from the history of slavery to the 21st century; and
- b. Identify important developments in the events and literature of the 21st century America for the African American.

## **3.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

### **3.3.1 Twenty-First Century African American Literature**

It is a common practice to study history and things that have happened to better understand what is currently happening and what can potentially happen. This unit identifies key points in African American history and explains how they have affected both the United States and the literature it produces.

We go back to the African American Civil Rights Movement which fought for the outlawing of racial discrimination, but the changes the movement brought affected much more than the law. We discovered that all facets of culture were drastically affected and changed due to the African American Civil Rights Movement. There was no more segregation in schools; politics was no longer a Caucasian male's game, and art was open to everybody. Perhaps the greatest impact on America's culture due to the African American Civil Rights Movement was the Black Arts Movement where everything that represents blackness was celebrated including music. The Black Arts Movement opened up this frontier, and it inspired future generations to follow in the footsteps of this movement past the borders of conventional art and into the world of

immigrants, minorities and outcasts. Many critics credit it with “motivating a new generation of poets, writers and artists to be resourceful. So much had happened in African American history that one cannot but look back to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, the stubbornness of Rosa Parks, the violence of the Black Panthers and the result of such reminiscence is the emotion that comes from African Americans and people generally.

African American literature would be forever changed from this point on. The culmination of this era was a significant turning point in American history. This is evident in the sheer volume of works that came out since then. Some of the most memorable novels written after the civil rights movement are the Pulitzer-prize-winning *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. These books were both written in the 1980’s by women who both lived and breathed the civil rights movement and these books provide a hauntingly accurate portrayal of late 19th and early 20th centuries black woman. In them, we find topics varied from freedom, because freeing yourself is one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self is another.

With the kind of creativity that came especially during the Harlem era and from the different proponents of selfhood, one cannot but celebrate black culture in America. The national awareness of black culture affects all fronts of art – music, dance, and even literature. These novels are important when analysing modern American literature because of the poignancy when discussing the impact of the society on the individual – regardless of time. It was Linda Krumholz who said that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* re-conceptualises American history.

African American literature has grown since the time the first piece came. The literature has moved from issues of race and oppression to other important issues in American society. Other



topics, such as space exploration, development in science and technology and the place of the black in it all are coming to take center stage in African American literature today.

Space exploration has had an enormous impact on American culture, particularly after Apollo 11 landed on the moon on July 20, 1969. The moon-landing inspired the world, and the astronauts involved are still being celebrated today. Other planets are being discovered every now and then and the returns of Star Trek, which was cancelled during its original running in 1966, had up to a fifty percent increase in ratings. Space was what the country dreamed about and that dream has surpassed the original intent. Science Fiction is also a possibility today because of these developments especially with a movement called the New Wave. This movement attempted to do away with the pulp science fiction and its themes, such as adventure, individualism, and space exploration. In 1969, author Brian Aldiss called space exploration "an old-fashioned diversion conducted with infertile phallic symbols." The New Wave lost momentum and died out after the moon-landing, because the moon-landing upheld all the themes of pulp science fiction. The story of the moon landing was the story of heroes adventuring and exploring into the unknown, and it captivated the hearts and minds of the American audience and it still does today. NASA is still going on missions and apart from these missions; we see other possibilities through pop culture especially the cinemas and books. We see possibilities such as human cloning and other medical advancements through books produced in the 21st century.

There is still reference being made to the 'cold war' between Russia and the US; there is also reference to the Vietnam War which was a high point in the hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union. The communist North Vietnam, supported by communist allies, was pressuring South Vietnam, an ally of the United States. And desperate to stop the spread of

communism, the United States sent military aid to South Vietnam. The situation escalated until the Vietnam Conflict became the Vietnam War to the American public and this war almost split the American nation as the military was divided from the government, with many veterans holding the belief that government policy dictated their actions instead of military doctrine, and that the government policies put them in more danger and restricted their ability to win the war. The cold war made it possible for individualism to thrive; there was no longer the personal sacrifice that characterised the Second World War. Enemy spies were everywhere, and nobody could be trusted. The American shifted towards anti-establishment opinions; so individualism became a way to separate one's self from the American government, which has been a constant portrayal in American fiction.

Another issue is that of terrorism which was fueled by September 11th, 2001 attack on the 'twin tower' and the Pentagon. This day marked a turning-point for Americans in just about every fashion. Foreign and domestic policies both underwent drastic changes; sons and daughters left home to fight in the war, but most importantly Americans were still standing strong. This trend is also reflected in literature – patriotism is now the watchword. The American writers, including the African American writers, now try to make the world hear American language, and experience American thinking because of this experience. This apparent call to arms, whether on the actual battlefield or not, is the impetus for many modern novels, but specifically *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that killed Osama Bin Laden*. Whether it is the novel or the soon-to-be released movie, the capitalisation of post-9/11 American literature is dreadfully obvious.

There are other effects of 9/11, especially the nation's awareness that there was a significant factor in the paradigmatic changes of that era. This can also be seen post 9/11 where the average

household in America has access to the internet. It is now an era where websites reach more people globally per day (millions of visits) than any newspaper or television show could dream.

The main frontier in American Literature is also changing, especially as it relates to social equality and the interactions of cultures that make the United States what it is today. The first example of this frontier is the concept of Civil Rights. The first movement for Civil Rights was the movement for African American equality, followed shortly by equality for women. More recently, the Civil Rights focus has shifted to equality for all groups in all settings, including the disabled, gay and lesbian groups, and soldiers. Another example of this frontier is the clash between traditional values and the new American lifestyle, especially as it relates to the issue of migration to the United States. Equality, as it were, is the most well-known of the Civil Rights movement. Many of the obvious fighters for African American equality include Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, but there is a myriad of literary works from other sources as well who discuss the idea of African American equality. One example of this literature is Audre Lorde's poem "Coal" in which she compares herself to a personification of coal and diamond. She begins with a double-consciousness of herself as both a piece of coal and of diamond: her true state is the diamond, but society places a veil over people and sees what they want to see, which is coal. This "veil" that Lorde refers to is primarily black illiteracy which is what is currently taking place. Emphasis is now on the education of the African American child irrespective of the financial background. The white people hitherto looked down on blacks because they were not educated and thus did not see them as equals despite the Civil Rights Movement. But there are changes to this trend today; hence, Lorde is able to separate herself from this group because she is both a black woman and she is educated - she uses words throughout her poem to cut away the black veil and reveal her diamond self underneath. This

goes to prove that although blacks are critical of themselves and how they are seen by others, they still know who they are and are confident that although they are looked down on by white people, they know that black people should be equal because of what they believe in.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

Never that! In this white man's world. They can't stop us , we been here all this time, they ain't took us out... They can never take us out! No matter what they say! About us being extinct, about us being.. Endangered species, we ain't neva gonn' leave this! We ain't never gonna walk off this planet.. Unless your choose to! Use your brains! Use your brains! It ain't them thats killing us, it's us that's killing us... It ain't them that's not gonna solve, It's us thats not gonna solve, i'm tellin you, you better watch it or be a victim... Be a victim in this white manz world." -- Tupac Amaru Shakur (1971-1996) Quote from the song "White Manz World."

The time period between 1965 to the present is home to several key cultural movements and events that have shaped nearly every facet of modern life, including the literature. Because this period includes the technological innovation of the superpowers of the world, more dramatic and important events happen in this time-span than in past periods. Because of this technological development, people's thoughts have also changed dramatically. The literature of this period has been affected by these developments also.

An often overlooked aspect of literature is public perception of literature, rather than actual content of the work. Writers rely heavily on the public, given that the public is their audience. Writers usually pay attention to public views and opinions, as those often dictate a writer's subject matter. However, with the advent of mass media, everyone can function as a literary critic. This new trend in and of itself represents the crossing of a frontier, in that it simply was not the case before the rise of the internet. Advances in technology have allowed for much faster transmission of ideas among literary enthusiasts. Another thing that makes literary enterprise

worth all the trouble is the commercialisation of literature. That is to say, a piece of literature can become an entire franchise. A prime example of this is what happened with Marvel, The Hunger Games, by Suzanne Collins, The story of Twilight, by Stephenie Meyer, The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones, by Cassandra Clare and so many others.

### **3.5 SUMMARY**

African American Literature in the 21st century has changed to the extent that everyone is a literary critic as it were, and this is made possible by means of modern technology. In the 21st century world, so many options are opened to the reader to be familiar with a piece of literature; this could be through the internet, magazines and movies. There are also many ways to know if a book is possibly worth reading without even having to pick it up. The internet is the 21st century frontier in which one can connect to the entire world especially from the homes and read about literature through online reviews. A different aspect of reviews we have today as opposed to how books were classically reviewed is that anyone can be a book critic using the internet. Literature can be reviewed by anyone that reads the work, which provides an even greater possible balance in the reviewing process instead of the reviews only coming from an actual critic. One of the biggest sources for purchasing literature is online through Amazon.com, which also is a great source for book reviews as well. People now access more books than they did previously.

### **3.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- Trace the evolution of African American literature from 1965 to date.
- Mention some of the important developments of the period.
- Attempt a compilation of the major events and works of the period.

- Discuss in some detail the relevance of self-assessment in the acquisition of the voice during the course of the 21th century.

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## **UNIT 4: THE PLACE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IN THE AMERICAN DREAM**

### **CONTENTS**

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 Main Content
  - 4.3.1 The American Dream and the African American
- 4.4 Conclusion
- 4.5 Summary
- 4.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 4.7 References/Further Reading

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

There is a common expression: “The American Dream.” Today, everyone talks about the dream and we have grown perhaps a little too accustomed to thinking of that dream as having only a financial or materialistic dimension. The actual American Dream has to do with having the right to decide what your own proper sphere is ... without permitting anyone else to decide that all-important matter for you.

Thus, the notion of the American Dream is deeply rooted in the history, culture and identity of the American people. The term, ‘American Dream’ was first used by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*,” which was written in 1931. In it, he opines that the American Dream is “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” [pp.5-6]. The *Oxford Guide to English and American Culture* suggests the following definition: it is “the belief of Americans that their country offers opportunities for a good and successful life. For minorities and people coming from abroad to live in America, the dream also includes freedom and equal rights.”

[p.13] It also suggests that there are opportunities for everyone, and it equally points to the fact that the ideas of unity and equality that were crucially important for immigrants are achievable. For those who came from different countries and from many different social groups, it is extremely significant to form a new nation: *e pluribus unum*. [p.10]. One can reveal more and more characteristic features of the notion of the American Dream, but its main constituent parts are mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, in which it is proclaimed that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

## **4.2 OBJECTIVES**

The unit’s objectives are to

- a. take the student through what is commonly referred to as the ‘American’ Dream;
- b. make them see the way the “American Dream” is reflected in the desires, strivings and self-esteem of the average African American;
- c. reveal some prominent African Americans’ attitude toward the American Dream; and
- d. illustrate the varieties of approach to the struggle for equal rights within the African American literature and society.

## **4.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

### **4.3.1 The American Dream and the African American**

The Dream which is one of the components of the American society has evolved since the beginning of its history. Long before ‘America’ became a country, it existed in the minds of human beings as a dream. America was a mythic El Dorado for the Pilgrims, where they could



not only found their commonwealth but also find their religious freedom. The Dream was in their minds especially when they needed somewhere to exercise their religious freedom; they understood the very idea of the dream. The Pilgrims had already had the dream of a better life and liberty when they boarded the *Mayflower* – they wanted to create a kind of *Utopia*, in which the tyranny of the Old World would be replaced by liberty, brotherhood and equality, a world devoid of conservatism; hence, the place to be is the new world.

Paul Le Blanc defines the American dream as pursuant to the idea that the United States is a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality among all -- but a dream frequently vitiated by the racist exclusion of African Americans and other groups from attaining the full rights of citizens. He therefore emphasised that exclusionary and discriminatory practices cannot be merely understood as segregation or disenfranchisement saying that inequalities in education, housing and job opportunities are primarily a function of racism, and this shows that African Americans continue to be denied the American dream. To combat racism, however, he says that American society needs to do more than show its practices. His definition of racism serves as a good starting place to understand why and how it exists, and he emphasised that racism means more than simply negative attitudes towards other groups. Racism, as it were, is the power one group possesses to dominate and control other races; this helps to deprive the subdued groups of their share in the American dream. Historically, since whites have been the group with the greatest amount of power in American society and elsewhere, they possess the power to deprive. The relationship between white privilege and racism comes clearly into focus when Le Blanc quotes Reverend Joseph Barndt: “Whether or not we are intentional bigots, we are all locked

inside a system of structured racism. As American citizens, every white person supports, benefits from, and is unable to be separated from white racism” (2003:21).

Alice Walker also indicts the white man for centuries of crimes against Black women and other people of colour through the institution of slavery and segregation.

It is very easy to just imagine what African Americans have been dreaming of since they first stepped on the shores of America. Whatever the components of the American Dream, the main idea of this notion for them is certainly freedom and healthy multi-racial union. They had no freedom till the 19th century that was when slavery was abolished; they had had no protection in law. Only after 1865 did newly freed African Americans start new lives in spite of the fact that the attitude to them was still negative. That is why there appeared one more component of their dream – the will to be treated equally with the white population of the country. It actually took them two generations after the end of the Civil War and participation in two World Wars to be seen as human beings; this was when segregation stopped, and that as much is the result of the protest in the streets, riots and civil disobedience. African Americans dreamt of being able to make choices without the restriction of their race and skin colour.

Although times have changed, the ‘American Dream’ is still there. In the 21st century, everyone in America can presumably understand what is meant by this notion. It remains a major element in their national identity. This idea of the American dream is gaining new shades of meaning by the day; people may interpret it differently, but it remains a vital part of the American society even today. This interpretation is greatly influenced by the historic events which take place in the country. For example, some years ago, because of the September 11 attacks and the War in Iraq,

people became so frightened and shocked that they questioned the Dream. They just wanted to feel safe and nothing more. However, as time goes by, the American Dream is seen to have come round. At present, it is said that about 63% of Americans believe that they are living the American Dream. Moreover, 62% believe that it is achievable for most Americans. The American Dream means different things to different people. For most it means, a good job and financial security. But, somewhat surprisingly, living in freedom came in second. It is quite natural because when people get something they wanted they stop dreaming about it and begin to dream of something else. For the black man in the USA, living the dream is more than just jobs and security, it means being understood, being taken seriously and being treated fairly. For them, the notion of the American Dream has been broadened, and in the future more new shades of meaning might be superimposed on it in accordance with the events in American every-day life. The concept of the American Dream was then married into the civil rights movement in such a way that it accounted for the concept of identity.

But the dilemma of identity equally led to the division of African Americans into two groups: integrationists and nationalists. The members of the former group found it possible to “be both” by establishing close relations with the white Americans on the basis of the Declaration of Independence. They believed that the white Americans could treat them as their equals according to what is written in the political documents. Integrationists’ optimism about the blacks achieving full citizenship rights in America was in a way connected to Christianity. Black preachers would say that Jesus Christ died for all people – the whites and the blacks alike. That is why the idea of equality lies not only in the Declaration of Independence, but also in religion. This enabled the pastors to become outstanding leaders in the black struggle for equality. Among

them one can name Martin Luther King, Sr., and Jr., William Holmes Borders, and Vernon Johns who spoke against segregation and racism in churches.

On the other hand, nationalist thinkers believed that only the African side of their identity is important. That is why they could not “be both”. They had experienced slavery for decades; then segregation, exploitation and other political and social restrictions. The only way for the blacks to stop it, according to nationalism, was to leave America and return to Africa or some other place. Only in this case they would have an opportunity to develop their culture being guided by their own history. Among the advocates of nationalism, one can name David Walker, Martin Delany, Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Their main idea was that black people are not Americans – they are Africans. They lost their hope in America; there was no American Dream for them anymore – they created their own dream – the African dream. As far as the religious basis of nationalism is concerned, the Nation of Islam was the most important influence of those times. For Malcolm X, it was as significant as the black church for Martin Luther King. Nationalists were desperate in their fury because they believed that the whites destroy their souls.

Whatever the means of achieving these aims, both movements were struggling for freedom and equality. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King reached an agreement that slavery in America was unparalleled in terms of its cruelty and impact on the people. Malcolm X said that the type of slavery that was practiced in America was never practiced in history by another country while Martin Luther King said that, “Nobody in the history of the world has suffered like the black man”. On this issue, they were in agreement in spite of their different approaches to the situation and so they led their people to the Promised Land.

Martin Luther King's speech – "I Have a Dream" – is known all over the world. In it, he stands up for the existence of the Dream in people's hearts and like an un-colonised African, he took so much pride in his race to the extent that his obsession even elicited suspicion from other civil rights leaders, for example Malcolm X. Dr King spoke out his mind without inhibition, and his speeches were and are still seen today as manifestoes of selfhood, an affirmation of everything good in blackness and all the positive sides of black life. Dr. King was a dreamer who longed for experience and spiritual freedom; he was like Moses leading African Americans to a desired destination, whereas, Malcolm X proclaims in "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech that he sees no Dream any more – only a Nightmare.

Taking into account the recent events, the present situation is not as radical as it used to be. Here Louis Farrakhan and Barack Obama come to the fore. As far as Louis Farrakhan's attitude to the American Dream is concerned, for him it is the "perfect union". It is a state when people forget about the characteristics that divide them, and an integral part of this state is, certainly, freedom. The speaker explains to the public that "freedom can't come from white folks", nor can it come "from staying here and petitioning this great government." The freedom problem has not yet been overcome in America, for the idea of white supremacy is still alive there.

Barack Obama's victory is said to be a great breakthrough for African Americans since the civil rights movement. His life and career made it possible for them to feel equal to the white Americans and hope for a better future with doors of opportunity opened for them. For centuries, African Americans were denied the basic rights of citizenship including the right to vote for the person who would lead the country they lived in. However, they have always claimed that they, too, have been Americans. The victory of one of them has shown that racism is no longer a vital

issue in America and individuals are judged, as Martin Luther King had dreamt, not *by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character*.

With Obamas victory twice, it is glaring that the American Dream still lives in the hearts of the Americans and it can come to pass. Hence, for many African Americans, Obama is an epitome of the American Dream, Obama as a black man managed to reach incredible heights of power and fame. He has raised the subject of the Dream a lot of times in the speeches and in his two books: *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. The Dream as we see today is one of the means that unite the Americans as they “*want these dreams for more than [them]selves – [they] want them for each other.*” The dream cannot be separated from the dreamer, hence when one talks about a dream, one tries not to delete the individual from the dream, hence also we talk about Martin Luther King Jr’s dream for the generality of African Americans but in relation to his personal aspirations. According to Obama, *it is the idea of mutual help that forms the basis for the way of making the American Dream come true*; after all, America is a place where all things are possible. This dream is also reflected in literature as great works came to describe, define and discuss the American Dream.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

The American Dream is a good deal closer to the ideals set out by some of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment—the founding fathers of the American nation. They inspired the dream of autonomy, of political awareness, of an inherent right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It fell to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to demand compellingly that America recognise an obligation to live up to its dream—to demand for all citizens, not grudging concessions, but

the fundamental right to empowered self-definition that is the bedrock of the ongoing American national experiment. Great men/women from ages past have come to terms with this great dream, and it can be summed up that all of them mention it in this or that way and all of them have their own vision of what people are dreaming about in their time. Though Malcolm X, denied the presence of the Dream in America, he still struggled for what could be called the Dream, the Nightmare as he saw it. Therefore, the American Dream is always there. It cannot be excluded from the analysis of American rhetoric as it has become the key component of the American history, lifestyle and way of thinking. In order to tap into this great dream, African Americans strive harder than other races for them to reach this dream. Their efforts can be equated with the efforts of the Jews under the heavy weight of the Pharaoh's whip; because Moses dared to challenge the Pharaoh's rule over the Jews, the people were punished but when the appointed time came, they were liberated. The African American, very much like the Jews had had to endure inhumane treatment but when the appointed time came, it came gloriously and he/she is free to show his/her right to exist just like others in the American society. The result is that African Americans can now excel in whatever they set out to do, of course with hard work, and today we can proudly point to Muhammed Ali, Michael Johnson, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and others in sports; we can mention great literary icons like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and so many others before them.

It was Jack Cafferty of CNN who recounted the following exposé on the American Dream vis-a-vis the place of the black man in it. He said: "Turns out the American Dream may not be for everyone". He referred to the Pew Charitable Trusts report which shows that "a family's race,

economic background and neighborhood play a role in economic mobility”. The study, according to Cafferty,

...finds that while 84% of Americans have higher incomes than their parents did at the same age, those born at the top and bottom of the income ladder are likely to stay there. When it comes to race, African Americans are less likely to top their parents' income and wealth than whites are. And blacks are more likely to be stuck at the bottom of the ladder or fall out of the middle.

The study, to him “couldn't even measure black mobility in the upper income levels because the number was too small. Meanwhile here's another piece to the wealth inequality puzzle: Recent Census Bureau data shows that white Americans have 22 times more wealth than blacks. Twenty-two times”. In 2010 the median household net worth for whites was about \$111,000 compared to less than \$5,000 for blacks. Whites also have 15 times more wealth than hispanics. This wealth inequality is due to many factors including the implosion of the real estate market along with higher unemployment rates among minority groups. Statistics like these are one of the many reasons why President Obama is such a historical figure. He was America's first ever African American president - with a background that certainly was not privileged. But Mr. Obama is the exception, not the rule. And the rule is, if you are born poor, you are probably going to stay that way. The question, according to Cafferty, is what does race have to do with achieving the American Dream? The answer, one may guess almost immediately.

Obama ran against Mit Romney, a white man in the main stream American politics but won a landslide at the polls in 2012. Blacks, whites, Asians and Latin Americans celebrated Obama's victory at the polls for he represented the American Dream.



## **4.5 SUMMARY**

Following the question raised by Cafferty, one is tempted to look back at the secondary position of persons of African descent throughout their history in America; one could reasonably argue that all efforts of creative writers from that group to redress the wrongs done to their race by the dominant race is a way of reassessing the American dream. However, for purposes of this unit, some parameters might be drawn, but some of these have already been established as to what the American dream is all about. Writers and critics alike have all tried to encourage practitioners of democracy to truly to live up to what democratic ideals on American soil mean because this will create an enabling environment for the dream to be realised.

In other words, the intention of African American writers in this sense is to show inequalities among races and socio-economic groups in America and to encourage a transformation in the society that engenders such inequalities. For African Americans, inequality began with slavery in a country that professed belief in an ideal democracy; could one group of persons enslave another? What forms of moral persuasion could be used to get them to see the error of their ways? It is so difficult to add up how, in a country that professed belief in Christianity, one group could still enslave the other when Christian doctrine says that God created 'equally'. How can one justify Jim Crow, inequalities in education, housing, jobs, accommodation, transportation, and a host of other things? All these "hows" could be responsible for the inequality in the sharing of the dream.

## **4.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- What exactly is the American Dream?

- Identify the parameters for acquiring this dream.
- Trace the evolution of this dream and point to its usefulness to the average African American
- Equate this dream to normal individual achievements.

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## **UNIT 5: EXPLORING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

### **CONTENTS**

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Objectives

5.3 Main Contents

5.3.1 The African American English, History and Literature

5.4 Conclusion

5.5 Summary

5.6 Tutor-Marked Assignment

5.7 References/Further Reading

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

Writing is, in essence, a process that involves negotiating culture in one way or another. The written text is a result of the interplay of culture, and the African American writer gives it form. To understand this interplay fully, it is necessary to define, as precisely as possible, the two conceptual pillars upon which this interplay rests: culture and African American literature. At its face value, culture is one of those terms in our daily lexicon for which there seems to be consensus of use. Looking at the word closely, one would simply say that it carries different meanings for different people. Definitions are almost inexhaustible in literature. In a more anthropological sense, Thomas Barfield in *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (2000) considers culture as “a non-biological concept transmitted by society. It includes all aspects of human enterprise such as the artistic, social, ideological, and religious patterns of behaviour, and the techniques for mastering the environment”. But it is defined in a numeric sense as “a social grouping that is smaller than a civilization but larger than an industry” (Winnick, 1956: 144). And when we say ‘social grouping’, we are invariably referring to an organization based on

relatedness or a shared common ancestry or a community of people sharing artifacts and living together at a given period and place such that the African American society is made off.

Culture may not be organic, but wherever there is human life, there is culture. Hence, if culture is non-genetic, it becomes a product of social interaction, and since culture is entirely the result of societal invention, and is transmitted by precept from one generation to the next, it may also be thought of in terms of heritage hence we talk about African American which happens to be a fusion of two different sensibilities; as DuBois calls it, it is a ‘double consciousness’ or ‘two souls in one body’, but these two selves are reconcilable. For this reason, the African American culture transcends the mere collection of isolated bits of individual behaviour.

## **5.2 OBJECTIVES**

The students should be able to:

- a. make inferences based on evidence so that their understanding of history is more complete and accurate;
- b. show that there are many gaps in history, especially the history of blacks in America;
- c. point to primary sources and demonstrate understanding of the context of history; and
- d. get a more accurate picture of what was going on at that moment up to this time.

## **5.3 MAIN CONTENTS**

### **5.3.1 The African American English, History and Literature**

One of the flash points of African American culture is its English which is also known as Ebonics. It is a variety of American English; its pronunciation is said to be very much like the southern American English which is spoken by many African Americans today. It shares many

characteristics with Creole. This English is said to have the same grammatical structure with West African languages; so it may not be out of place to say that the English is African-based language with English words. Speakers of this language are typically bi-dialectal; hence, status, topic and setting all influence its usage just like other linguistic forms. This usage is common in African American literature for as mentioned before, the need to communicate with one another and the slave masters prompted this peculiar dialect.

By 1895, African American dialect had come to connote black innate difference, a kind of mental inferiority. It was seen as the linguistic sign of both human bondage and lack of progress. To some at this time, African American dialect signified difference as well as showing that they are objects and not subjects in society. For the writer, to draw on this same speech as a medium of expression, especially to present the mode of realism, suggests certain boldness and care showing the ability to marry both the Standard English with the peculiar black speech.

When African Americans were pressed for a mode of representation when they were looking for the theory of mimesis, Hurston steps in and sweeps into narrative strategies which can only be rivaled by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Hurston points out to the world that African American dialect is not a speech of backwardness. Rather, she demonstrates that this speech keeps alive the oral form of African American experience.

In the plantation, proficiency in the English language was seen by blacks as a step towards freedom. It meant a sure way out of bondage, but Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates that African Americans need to have their own unique dialect that only few whites can understand; they need a dialect that can be an effective element of resistance.

Because there is the need for a distinctive voice, African Americans then as they still do kept their variant of English even though it was termed 'rural' and 'poor' variant. Hurston in this case makes her character act out of communicative competence; hence when Janie is explaining something, she acts it out, and she demonstrates it for effective comprehension. Through this performance as one can observe, the oral form is retained and kept permanently secured. Perhaps this is the reason why Gates Jr. (1988:176-81) calls Hurston's novel 'a speakerly text'. What is glaring is that when you are reading the novel, you cannot help but over hear the conversation going on in the text. For example, Janie's conversation with Pheoby is as real as can be, especially when Pheoby says: "*Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo*" (183). Hurston's use of the black dialect is so smooth that it gives no room for confusion because she knows where to stop writing in dialect. All of the narration and descriptions in the book are in plain English, what one may call Standard English; she does not confuse the reader by putting narration in dialect, only the characters' dialogue is in dialect.

Alice Walker says that Hurston's novel provides the African American literary community with its prime symbol of racial health, a sense of black people who remain complete, complex, undiminished, even in the face of discrimination.

Thus, the search for the telling form of language makes the African American employ African American dialect, and this in turn is equated with the search for the true self because using this dialect gets him/her closer to his/her real self. Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* says *Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now A' kin set in mah house and live by comparisms* (p. 1 and 87). Janie tells her friend Phoeby her life history and says she has seen it all – the good, the

bad and the terrible. Hence, all she does now is to compare. Through the dialect, the African American explores deeply the nature of his/her people as well as his/her own nature.

Exploring the folk life is another way through which the African American can connect to his/her root and like an un-colonised African, he/she derives so much pride and joy in anything black to the extent that the obsession even elicited suspicion from other black people and made them so uncomfortable when such a writer as Zora Neale Hurston was around them. Hurston's novel mainly moves the image of the black man beyond stereotypes as she seeks the ever-evolving ways of the folk.

Hurston's novel as a manifestation of what the folk stands for in African American culture is lively, lyrical, funny and poignant; as a first-rate ethnographer, conducting fieldwork for Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, Hurston was able to delve into the cultural root of her people. Thus, it is not surprising, that Hurston's fictional output is laced with the sounds, songs, and stories of the Southern black folk tradition. The novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, often acclaimed as Hurston's masterpiece, is perhaps the richest beneficiary of her work as a folklorist.

Most African American writers following this trend grasp a theme of black folklore, delving into the true nature of man, the true nature of women and showing in a very moving tone how these two natures blend and, in the same vein, explain that the love for blackness is more or less a vivid manifesto of selfhood. They show this love as an affirmation of what is good and positive, what is authentic and potent. In their writings too, they break down stereotypes and paint a canvas of multi-colour that reflects this love for their people. The African American writer succeeds in capturing the tones and gestures of the people they write about. Hence, in Hurston's

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one can visualise Janie and Pheoby sitting on the porch talking about life generally; one can picture Janie telling her life journey to horizon and the lessons learnt to Pheoby on the porch. Christian (1985:11) points out that Hurston “delighted in the folks’ continuous interest, whether devastatingly cynical, tender or humorous, in the push-and-pull of human relationships”. This delight is effectively related in the relationship between Janie and Pheoby, Janie and Tea-Cake.

In the novel, Hurston provides an invaluable insight into a people and a way of life. She shows the people of Eatonville, Joe Starks, the mayor, Janie, his wife, Pheoby, Janie’s friend, Sam, Lige, Matt and others as they truly are without auditing them. Hurston presents these people as communal, law-abiding people which is what African American culture preaches. African American culture as reflected in literature talks about black people as people who love life, people who cherish music and people who are very religious, and not the care-free happy-go-lucky fellas the Whiteman would want one to see. The people of Eatonville, as portrayed by Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, clearly show that African Americans are very organised and believe strongly in hard work as a way out of bondage. According to Stevens (1937), whether there was ever a town in Florida inhabited and governed entirely by Negroes or not, you will have no difficulty believing in the Negro community which Zora Neale Hurston has either reconstructed or imagined in this novel. To him, the town of Eatonville is as real in these pages as Jacksonville is in the pages of Rand McNally; and the lives of its people are rich, racy, and authentic.

Alain Locke, in *Opportunity* (1938), says that Janie’s story should not be re-told; it must be read. He recognises Hurston’s gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humour which he says



keeps her flashing on the surface of her community and her characters. Locke also acknowledges Hurston's ability to dive down deep down into the inner psychology of her characters to give sharp analysis of their social backgrounds.

Blackness to the African American writer is a special gift and their pride in blackness made them venture into the inner lives of their characters and this has helped to promote black life, and the promotion of black life is key to their existence. African American's portrayal of the blues and some other cultural outlets also encouraged a number of articles about the importance of blues in African American culture, and what is visible in their work is both cosmic and comic; it is unique and enduring.

In his introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction*, John Edgar Wideman writes, "Our stories can place us back at the center, at the controls; they can offer alternative realities" (McMillan, vii). Wideman's words can be applied to the works written by African Americans as their works connect them to their experience as a people. They have been able to create narratives that not only provide deep insights into the historical and contemporary realities of black people but also offer readers moral guidance, practical solutions, and "down to earth" insight into why they are who they are in America today. Their writing often point to universal elements of the human condition, and so they try to filter their rendition of such universality through the experiences of black people. Another of African American culture in African American literature is traditional African emphasis on orality and word power found in the African American storytelling tradition. Black storytellers continue to share stories containing myriad amounts of wisdom that assist in the day-to-day tasks of living for black people. David Anderson, author, educator and professional storyteller whose performance name is Sankofa, explains why African American storytelling has filtered into African American

literature. Storytelling in this sense is that body of traditional stories that inform and energise the African American struggle to *preserve* and *perpetuate* the humanity of African American people. Storytelling is an emerging concept, a tool for those who wish to both critique and praise African American culture (qtd. in Sobol 184). This concept suggests that storytelling is a vital aspect of the African American experience, and it is fast becoming an entity in itself that is separate from the storytelling practices of other regional, racial, and national groups. The definition given above empowers the act of storytelling and the story itself as a tool used by African American writers to boost black culture. In other words, storytelling does not only reflect the experiences, past and present, of the black people in black community, but it also creates change by influencing the heart, mind, and/or behaviour of the listener/reader. The act of storytelling which is embedded in African American culture has the ability to preserve and perpetuate black humanity.

Examinations of the history or function of black stories or storytelling traditions are found in anthologies. For example, Linda Goss' and Marian Barnes' *Talk that Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling* which presents a large collection of black stories that are grouped under specific thematic categories. *Jump Up and Say: A Collection of Black Storytelling*, also edited by Linda Goss along with Alan Goss, is a collection of stories, praise-songs, and poems that were created by both Africans and African Americans. Alan Dundes's *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, an anthology that explores the folklore and verbal arts of African Americans through critical essays is also an in-depth study of African American storytelling traditions that have found their ways into mainstream African American literary landscape today.

With this rich cultural background, it is not surprising to find African American books topping the bestseller lists. Among the first books to do so was *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley. The book, a fictionalised account of Haley's family history—beginning with the kidnapping of Haley's ancestor Kunta Kinte in Gambia through his life as a slave in the United States—won the Pulitzer Prize and became a popular television mini-series. Haley also wrote *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1965. Other important writers in recent years include literary fiction writers Gayl Jones, Rasheed Clark, Ishmael Reed, Jamaica Kincaid, Randall Kenan, and John Edgar Wideman. African American poets have also gained attention. Maya Angelou read a poem at Bill Clinton's inauguration; Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995, and Cyrus Cassells's *Soul Make a Path through Shouting* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1994. Cassells is a recipient of the William Carlos Williams Award. Natasha Trethewey won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry with her book *Native Guard*. Lesser-known poets like Thylas Moss also have been praised for their innovative work. Notable black playwrights include Ntozake Shange, who wrote *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, the prolific August Wilson, who won two Pulitzer Prizes for his plays. Most recently, Edward P. Jones won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Known World*, his novel about a black slaveholder in the antebellum South. The list is endless.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION**

Finally, African American literature has gained added attention through the works of talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who repeatedly has leveraged her fame to promote literature through the medium of her Oprah's Book Club. At times, she has brought African American writers a far

broader audience than they otherwise might have received. It was W.E.B. DuBois who in his *Black Reconstruction* (1935) said that:

. . . no amount of flowery romance and personal reminiscences of its protected beneficiaries can keep the world from knowing that slavery was a cruel, dirty, costly and inexcusable anachronism, which nearly ruined the world's greatest experiment in democracy (715).

The African American writer, having attempted a journey of a life time through slavery, tries to preserve details of his voyage through the most coherent of all cultural systems—writing his peculiar experience for others to read. Through his works, one is allowed to witness, if not the trip itself, at least a representation of the voyage that provides some view of their emergence. According to D’Jimo Kouyate, a Senagalese griot, “one of the roles that the griot in African society had before the Europeans came was maintaining a cultural and historical past with that of the present” (179). To him, “The griot” “was the oral historian and educator in any given society” (179).

African American writers recognise their lost cultural connections to their ancestral homeland which is Africa; so it is their intention to let the reader understand that gaining such knowledge is only part of the battle but putting it to use is enduring in the process of achieving selfhood for self-empowerment.

## **5.5 SUMMARY**

In the early 1990s, African- American writers and scholars, such as Toni Morrison and Michael North, broke from established modes of African American literary criticism. They, like Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker, successfully legitimised African American literary expression by demonstrating its internal logic and broader significance as a tradition distinct from canonical Anglo American high modernism. Pushing such thinking to the next logical step,

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) and North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (1994) proved how ideas of "blackness" and an engagement with African American culture informed that movement in all its most familiar forms and achievements. These writers demonstrated that there is a connection between their cultural root in Africa and their new world. African American writers today are pursuing avenues opened up by the work of Morrison and North, and African American Modernism which gives them a wide variety of contributions that trace the extended and diverse connections between the most controversial of canonical modernist writers and various aspects and representatives of African American culture during the early part of the twentieth century.

Today the African American writer is trying to exhibit an admirable coherence so as to achieve a strikingly high and uniform level of quality. African Americans and African American culture over the years have intertwined and have come together to create a unique kind of writing that is being celebrated all over the world today.

## **5.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- What is the relationship between African American culture and African American literature?
- Attempt a discussion of the different tools used by African American writers in sustaining their culture.
- Evaluate the story-telling tradition in African American literature
- Discuss some of the writers who specifically carved out their unique identities using their cultural root in Africa.
- Discuss in some detail the idea that literature and society go hand in hand.

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## **UNIT 6: AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AS LITERATURE OF ‘OTHERNESS’**

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### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

What I am calling for, against either universalism or cultural relativism, is politics that is premised on closer encounters, on encounters with those who are other than 'the other' or 'the stranger' [...]. Such a politics based on encounters between other others is one bound up with responsibility - with recognizing that (labouring) relations between others are always constitutive of the possibility of either speaking or not speaking. [...] It is the work that needs to be done to get closer to others in a way that does not appropriate their labour as 'my labour', or their talk as 'my talk', that makes possible a different form of collective politics. The 'we' of such a collective politics is what must be worked for, rather than being the foundation of our collective work.” (Sarah Ahmed, 2000)

The Other does not affect us as what must be surmounted, enveloped, dominated, but as other, independent of us: behind every relation we could sustain with [her], an absolute upsurge. It is this way of welcoming an absolute existent that we discover in justice and injustice, and that discourse, essentially teaching, effectuates. The term welcome of the Other expresses a simultaneity of activity and passivity which places the relation with the other outside of the dichotomies valid for things: the a priori and the a posteriori, activity and passivity.” (Emmanuel Levinas, 1961)



African American literature from its inception has always questioned the idea that humanity is white, the idea that the white man must define the black man and equally give him space in the scheme of things. This literature signifies that this act of defining and allowing is not just because the white defines the black man but because he will not define the black man in himself except in relation to him (the white man). In this case, the black man is not seen as an autonomous being, and if this is to happen, the black man can never think of himself without the white man. Of course the white man can think of himself without the black man which is unfair. In this case, also, the black man is simply what the white man decrees; hence, the black man is referred to as the 'other', no more, no less. The black man is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. The white man is the subject; he is the absolute, and so the black man is the 'other'.

Moving into the realm of the inaudibility of the Other's voice, one is bound to encounter the question of presentation, re-presentation and narration. Those in the Humanities and Social Sciences, often times, lay claims on the notion that academic privilege enables them to represent the Other in all her/his bodily totality, as a way in which justice can be inscribed, served and handed out piecemeal through the moment of representing her/his vulnerability. But, what about the incommensurable possibility that this voice of the Other is always and already impossible to represent? What would it mean for representation when representation is marked by an ethical failure on the part of the 'selves', thinkers, writers, activists, and artists? How can one come to terms with this ethical failure toward representing? Perhaps, the desire might be to think of this failure as not a failure on their part as it were owing to de Beauvoir's idea that otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Of course one cannot remain passive in the face of the trend today. Ethics, justice, equity, politics and all other forms are said to have originated from

the impossibility to absolutely represent. The failure to represent is not a failure as it were, but the origins of a possible ethical way to relate to an Other, to see in this the beginnings of a community, a collectivity, and a sociality that comes *to be*, allows the “coming-to-be” to occur, in the mutual telling and re-telling of one another’s inaudible narratives. Thus, what is often seen is a situation whereby one group sets itself up as the absolute ‘one’ and then setting up the ‘other’ against itself.

## **6.2 OBJECTIVES**

- a. To examine the image of ‘otherness’ operates in African American Literature
- b. To investigate how the African American cultural sphere defines its group boundary/boundaries and group identity.
- c. To discuss the starting point for defining ‘otherness’
- d. To explore the category of extreme ‘otherness’ as it relates to African American literature
- e. To examine whether the modern concepts concerning group identity and group formation can be applied to African American literature

## **6.3 MAIN CONTENT**

### **6.3.1 Otherness and African American Literature**

While African American literature is well accepted in the United States, there are numerous views on its significance, traditions and theories. To the genre's supporters, African American literature arose out of the experience of Blacks in the United States, especially with regards to historic slavery, racism and discrimination, and it is an attempt to refute the dominant culture's

literature and power which tries to undermine its existence. In addition, supporters see the literature existing both within and outside American literature and as helping to revitalise the country's writing. To critics, African American literature is part of a Balkanisation of American literature. In addition, there are some within the African American community who do not like how their own literature sometimes showcases Black people.

Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subjected to racist attitudes. This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African American literature, to prove they were the equals of European American authors. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr, has said, “it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture” (*Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial' Self*, 1987:.26).

Exclusionary practice is an ancient phenomenon; policy of exclusion possibly stems from the same source as classism, racism, sexism, ageism and all other “isms”, the urge to dominate, oppress and exclude others from the scheme of things. Exclusion, mentally, physically, economically, socially and/or politically, remains the basis where power is derived. From the beginning, the urge to dominate, showing off the weaknesses of other,s has been there. One group has always enjoyed ordering the other back to the background; one group has always considered the emancipation of the other as a menace, and one group has always detested the other and presented a dangerous competition to the other’s existence.

To perpetuate this, one group has always drawn on whatever it could to subjugate the other, drawing especially on philosophy, religion and even science. The American society has tirelessly sought to prove that the African American is inferior, it deems itself superior because it is what it

is; therefore, one is not at all surprised to see the kind of treatment meted out to the black man in the society as he is not given the chance to explain his experience. The black man's contributions are rarely mentioned because as the "other" in society, he is not permitted success, and this may be why his literary production has been seen as inferior.

However, by countering the claims of the dominant culture, African American writers are not just proving their worth; they are equally attempting to subvert the literary and power traditions of the United States. Scholars expressing this view are said to be asserting that writing has traditionally been seen as *something defined by the dominant culture as a white/ male activity*. This means that, in American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been intimately tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the African Diaspora, African American literature thereby broke *the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power*. This view of African American literature as a tool of struggle for Black political and cultural liberation has been stated for decades, perhaps most famously by W. E. B. Du Bois.

The question of the subject and subjectivity directly affects black people's perceptions of their identities and their capacities to resist the conditions of their domination, their 'subjection'. The status of the human individual was one of the key features of Enlightenment philosophy. Descartes' declaration "*I think, therefore I am*" confirms the centrality of the autonomous human individual, a founding precept of humanism, a precept that effectively separated the subject from the object, thought from reality, or the self from the other. The individual, autonomous 'I', was one that operated in the world according to this separation and was no longer to be seen as

merely operated upon by divine will or cosmic forces. The individual self was separate from the world and could employ intellect and imagination in understanding and representing the world.

The autonomous human consciousness was seen to be the source of action and meaning rather than their product. This is a position referred to as 'Cartesian individualism', one that tends to overlook or downplay the significance of social relations or the role of language in forming the self. This is the ideal that drove the early African Americans, and it is still the same ideal that drives them today, especially in relation to space and subjectivity. Synergy which means the product of two (or more) forces that are reduceable to neither is what the typical African American has embraced today because it is a way of escaping from some of the less fortunate aspects of the term hybridity as it emphasises the positive and energetic aspects of the process of transculturation and the equal but different elements that the various historical periods and forces have contributed in forming the modern African American condition.

It has always been said that African American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. Somehow African American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part. The same can be said for African American literature. While it exists fully within the framework of a larger American literature, it also exists as its own entity. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices are created in isolation. The benefit of this is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalise the larger literary world (McKay, 2004). This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the Black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalising American culture.

We have already established the fact that 'otherness' tends to boost the dominant race's ego; hence the 'self' usually creates an 'other' as soon as one disappears. It was Michel Foucault who postulated the idea of 'otherness' in his *Madness and Civilization* when he observes that as soon as leprosy disappeared from the streets of Europe, the west according to him, immediately invented another 'other' in 'madness'. Hence, the concept of 'otherness' can be said to be as old as consciousness itself in that even in a household of say three wives, the man chooses his favourites among the women, and there is equally the tendency that two of the women may unite against the third, probably the man's favourite, and this ultimately makes the man's favourite the 'other'. In a community, anyone who happens to be a stranger naturally becomes the 'other'. In a country such as the US, citizens see other people, for instance, the Cubans as the 'other'. Jews are the 'other' for the anti-semitics and so the African American is the natural 'other' for the white supremacists. So, as far as de Beaviour is concerned, 'otherness' has always been with us, and it will certainly remain with us, and there will always be the need for an 'other' in society. Hence, we talk about African American literature as the literature of the 'other'.

If we say that the white man has already set himself as the 'essential' as opposed to the 'other', then the inessential, the object, the black man has no say in the scheme of things. The whites are in the majority, imposing their rules over the minority race(s). With these arguments, the question one may ask is: What could be responsible for one group subjugating the other? The answer is not far-fetched for 'otherness' defines the black man as the other half of humanity; he is the other half that helps, that assists in the work of the society, whether by staying out of the way or by relieving the 'primary beings, (whites) of chores that would ordinarily impede them in their work. 'Otherness' defines the black man as an adjunct, an alter which buttresses the fact that they are servants to the superior beings (whites). Otherness means that blacks must be told

what to do but happily today, the black man through various efforts has authentically assumed a subjective role in society, he is building concrete means of organizing himself into a unit and building on his history and equally walking out of 'otherness'.

Whether or not African American literature will maintain this pattern in the coming years remains to be seen. But one big thing is that the African American has created something out of nothing, and he is gradually attaining the status of the 'ultimate' and not the 'other'.

Since African American literature is already popular with mainstream audiences, it is possible that its ability to develop new styles and voices—or to remain "authentic," in the words of some critics may be sustained.

Academics and intellectuals have argued that African American literature only exists as part of a balkanisation of literature or as an extension of the culture wars into the field of literature and these people feel that literature is splitting into distinct and separate groupings because of the rise of identity politics in the United States and other parts of the world, but they equally reject bringing identity politics into literature because this would mean that only women could write about women and for women; and only Black women can explain black women's experience. The general view appears to be that American literature is not breaking apart because of new genres like African American literature. Instead, American literature is simply reflecting the increasing diversity of the United States and showing more signs of diversity than ever before in its history (Andrews, 1997; McKay, 2004).

Some of the criticisms of African American literature over the years have come from within the community; some argue that Black literature sometimes does not portray Black people in a

positive light and that it should. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the NAACP's *The Crisis* on this topic, saying in 1921, *We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one.* He added in 1926, *All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.* DuBois and the editors of *The Crisis* consistently stated that literature was a tool in the struggle for African American political liberation. His belief in the propaganda value of art showed when he clashed in 1928 with the author Claude McKay over his best-selling novel *Home to Harlem*. Du Bois thought the novel's frank depictions of sexuality and the nightlife in Harlem appealed only to the *prurient demand[s]* of white readers and publishers looking for portrayals of Black *licentiousness*. He said, '*Home to Harlem*' ... *for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath.*(Du Bois, "Two Novels." *The Crisis* 35, June 1928: 202) Others made similar criticism of Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry* in 1929. Addressing prejudice between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Blacks, the novel infuriated many African Americans, who did not like the public airing of their *dirty laundry*.

Of course, literature should be able to present the full truth about life and people, and this is what Langston Hughes articulated in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). He wrote that Black artists intended to express themselves freely no matter what the Black public or white public thought. More recently, some critics accused Alice Walker of unfairly attacking black men in her novel *The Color Purple*. In his updated 1995 introduction to his novel, *Oxherding Tale*, Charles Johnson criticized Walker's novel for its negative portrayal of African American males: *I leave it to readers to decide which book pushes harder at the boundaries of convention, and inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet.* For some critics, there is no such thing as Black literature. There's good literature and bad literature. And



that's all. But white writers' literary treatment of the black presence has been studied more by historians than literary scholars. While literary scholars – Toni Morrison, John Cooley, and Leslie Fiedler – have examined literary attitudes towards black presence; they discuss major nineteenth and twentieth century fiction writers. Toni Morrison's definition of presence in analysing African American literature is worthy of note; she made reference to the transformation of black physical presence into an imaginative literary presence. Thus, the literary depictions by African Americans demonstrate that black writers reveal their cultural authority. They are able to adopt multiple perspectives to interpret the black experience as a cultural text.

#### **6.4 CONCLUSION**

In general terms, the 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world.

The colonised subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the coloniser and colonised and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonising culture and world view.

Although the term is used extensively in existential philosophy, notably by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* to define the relations between 'Self' and 'Other' in creating self-awareness and ideas of identity, the definition of the term as used in current post-colonial theory is rooted in the Freudian and post-Freudian analysis of the formation of subjectivity, most notably in the work of the psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Jacques Lacan. Lacan's use of the term involves a distinction between the 'Other' and the 'other', which can lead to some confusion, but it is a distinction that can be very useful in discussing the place of African American literature and postcolonial theory.

## 6.5 SUMMARY

Socially, “otherness” is demeaning; economically, it is self-effacing; and politically, it is self-excluding. All these put together reduces the “other” to a non-being. Educationally, the “other” in society is nowhere as he/she is not even given the chance in the first place to be “somebody”. In war time, the “other” is sacrificed on the altar of carelessness as he/she suffers untold hardships, of course those with teeth suffer, how much more those without gums? The “other” in society is particularly vulnerable in most cases as he/she is exposed to all manners of abuse and assault. Even in peace time, the “other” is handicapped in education, health and basic necessity of normal life. The “other” is often a victim of violence within the community; he/she is subjected to abominable and degrading treatment in society as a lot is done to humiliate and demoralise her, and the “other” is like a battered goose in society.

The irony of the whole deal is that the “other must accept his/her “otherness” in good faith because if he/she declines to be the “other” in society; it may be taken to mean that he/she has refused to be party to the deal, a deal which is generally seen to be “fair” enough and refusing to be part of this generous deal will invariably be taken to mean that the “other” is renouncing all the privileges conferred on him/her by this “holy” alliance. It will be taken to mean that the “other” is refusing the sovereign’s protection and is ready to assume moral justification for his/her existence because to *“exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness”* (Bhabha, 1994:63) and there can never be a time when the “other” will be allowed space to even think of occupying the place of the “subject”.

In his analysis of identity, Bhabha (1994:50) interrogates the image of the “other” which he says is: *“A metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonymy,*

*a sign of its absence and loss*” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994:50) and so when the society created an “other”, it expected that the “other” manifests deep-seated tendencies towards complicity; it expects the “other” to accept his/her place without questioning, and this has made the “other” ever incapable of claiming the status of subject because his/her existence depends largely on the society. With this trend, it is all too evident, too glaring, that the society is satisfied with the role the so-called “other” is made to play in society today, and the “other” in turn has resigned to fate consoling himself/herself with “*blessed be the Lord who created me according to His will*” (Ruth 1980:145).

## **6.6 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS**

- What are the features of ‘otherness’ in African American literature?
- How has the African American writer fought the placement of his/her work as the work of the ‘other’?
- Examine the structure of the American society that tends to make the African American the natural ‘other’.
- Explore the space of the ‘other’ in relation to the ‘subject’.

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