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The Origin and Growth of African American Literature

Dr. B. Lakshmi

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Abstract

This paper explores the origin and growth of African American literature. African American literature is a celebration of human and social rights. Black writers have used their skills to tell the world about the scars and pain of Black life. African American literature in America tells a story that can be understood as a counter-narrative, an alternate story about black and white people that works against the dominant society's biased portrayals. The first literature by blacks in America was not in written form, but in the oral tradition. The enslaved Africans expressed their sorrow, frustration, anger, oppression, elation, and religious faith in collective

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voice. These are the integral part of the early literature of the black People in America. Lucy Terry's *Bars Fight* is the oldest known piece of African American literature.

Status of Early Africans in America

The earliest African arrivals were viewed in the same way as indentured servants from Europe. Unfortunately, this similarity did not continue for a long time. By the latter half of the 17th century clear differences existed in the treatment of black and white servants. A 1662 Virginia law assumed Africans would remain servants for life. Africans were forbidden to speak their traditional languages. This had the effect of making it very difficult for Africans to sustain their history and culture. Language is, as Cheikh Anta Diop says, 'the primary transmitter of culture' (P.2). An African who did not understand what was being communicated to him, and was beaten for not responding to the strange utterances of the slave owners. The enslaved Africans must have felt that learning the language would lessen the severity of the treatment they received from their oppressors. Forbidden to use their traditional languages, the Africans, having come from a historical tradition of story tellers, used this inherited genius to tell stories in the oral tradition, even as they struggled to learn English.

Oral Literature

The first literature by blacks in America was not in written form, but in the oral tradition. It consists of history, folktales, poetry, including spirituals, gospel music, blues and rap. The enslaved Africans expressed their sorrow, frustration, anger, oppression, elation, and religious faith in the collective voice. These are the integral part of the early literature of the black people in America, of the African Americans - of how they viewed themselves and others, and how they amused themselves to survive in a hostile white society. Joel Chandler Harris's *The First Nine Books of Black Folklore*, is the earliest attempt to collect this oral literature.

Emergence of Written Literature

The earliest extant written literature started at the beginning of the 18th century by blacks in America, was poetry. All the earliest poets, Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Jupitar Hammon, Francis Harper and George Moses Horton were slaves, dependent on the generosity of their owners to publish their works. Lucy Terry's *Bars Fight* is the oldest known piece of African

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American literature. Phillis Wheatley was the first African American who published a book in America. Her poems are *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Her poetry was praised by many of the leading figures of the American Revolution, including George Washington, who personally thanked her for a poem she wrote in his honour. But George Moses Horton departed from the religious verse of his predecessors. His first volumes of poems *Hope of liberty (1829)*, made clear Horton's desire for spiritual freedom:

And before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave,
And go on to my lord and be free. (Stanza 1)

Early African American Fiction

African American fiction begins with William Wells Brown's *Clotel or The President's Daughter*, was the first documented novel by an African American, but it was published in England. This novel was written in the 'genteel' tradition that is, it mildly protested slavery. Brown is also credited with being the first black play-wright. The best known 19th century fiction writers include Frank J. Webb, Martin R. Delany, Harriet Wilson and Charles Chesnut. Harriet E. Wilson's semi-autobiography novel was registered under the title *Our Nig*. The discovery of this book by Yale Professor Henry Louis Gates and his 59-page introduction explores the historical and literary significance of the novel, and also describes Wilson's racial identity by studying documents of that period.

The Slave Narrative Tradition

The slave narrative tradition had flowered fully in the middle of the 19th century. At that time, the controversy over slavery led to impassioned literature on both sides of the issue, with books like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* representing the abolitionist view of the evils of slavery, while the Anti-Tom literature by white Southern writers like William Gilmore Simms represented the Pro-Slavery view point. To present the true reality of slavery, a number of former slaves and free-born slaves such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown wrote slave narratives, which became a mainstream of African American literature. The slave and religious narratives represent complementary black journeys to freedom through

religious language. The first was the search for release from physical bondage; the second, the quest for black authority and power through the word of the Scripture.

Black Poetry

Black poetry also flourished in the 19th century. There are more than three dozen poets whose works found their way into print. Frances Watkins Harper published eight volumes of poetry. The most memorable of these poets was Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first in his race to achieve national acclaim by winning high praise from William Dean Howells. Between 1893 and 1905 he had published eight volumes of poetry, eight novels and a collection of short stories. Booker T. Washington called him 'the poet laureate of the negro race.' Counter Cullen's *Negro Poets - Their Poems* and Erlene Stetson's *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*, contains the most comprehensive listing of black women poets.

Black Drama

King Shotaway, a drama of a slave insurrection in the Island of St. Vincent, staged at the African Grove Theatre in New York, is probably the first play written and performed by African Americans. William Wells Brown wrote dramas that he read to enthusiastic audiences during his abolitionist lectures in America and Europe. One that survives is *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom*, a drama in five acts.

Black Autobiography

Autobiography dominated African American literature in the 19th century while fiction does the same in the twentieth century. The writer who bridged the two centuries most successfully was Charles W. Chesnutt, America's first man of letters. He began short fiction in the newspapers in the mid-1880s. He was the pioneer of the new literature early 1900s, and the first black novelist to be taken seriously by the white literary establishment. The Chesnutt famous novels are *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *Colonel's Dream*. The other important novels are W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of the Excluded Man*.

Black History

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American black history is the struggle of black Americans for their human and social rights. In 1863, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln had ended the slavery of blacks. But their position in American society remained unchanged in the south. Especially in the south, government laws were used to keep black Americans in low social position. Around the turn of the century, blacks began moving from the South to the cities of the North. In the North, young black artists and writers began their long struggle for social justice for their people. This cultural movement became known as ‘**The New Negro Movement**’ and later it was called Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940 brought new attention to African American literature. Harlem Renaissance showed the unique culture of the African American and redefined African American literature, art, music, and dance; and classical works in the field from Jazz to theatre, began to flourish in Harlem, a neighborhood of New York City. Black writers wrote about the effect racism and oppression had on the everyday experiences of black people. Harlem was the queen of the black belts drawing African Americans together in a vast humming hive. W.E.B. Du Bois prophesied in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea (P.182).

Black Music and Dance

The black music and dance also flourished in Harlem Renaissance. People of African descent have been the partners in the creation of America and American culture from its outset. Black music and dance so perfectly expressed the national mood, which became known as the Jazz age. During this time, the musical style and culture of blacks attracted the white novelists, dramatists and composers; they started to inculcate the tendencies and themes of the African American in their works and also used poems written by African American poets in their songs. They further, liked to include the rhythms, harmonies and melodies of African American music such as blues, spirituals and jazz in their concert pieces. Negroes began to merge with whites in the classical world of musical composition. The first Negro to gain worldwide recognition as a

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concert artist in both his region and internationally was Roland Hayes. The New Yorkers flocked to Harlem to hear great Jazz artists like Duke Ellington, Fletcher and James P. Johnson in the flashing night spots m like the legendary cotton clubs. These weren't just playing Jazz, they were inventing it. Jazz is the dazzling jewel of the African American movement.

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance also influenced the American literary scene. White writers, fascinated with the vitality and freshness of the 'new' Black literature, used Black themes in their works. Eugene O'Neill wrote *The Emperor Jones* (1920); Waldo Frank, *Holiday* (1923); Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (1925); and *Nigger Heaven* (1926) by Carl Van Vechten. *Negro* (1934), an anthology by Nancy Cunard, is a useful volume. It includes works by Africans in America and the Diaspora. *Negro* was reprinted in 1970.

Richard Wright's works are characterized by his use of stark realism to describe the black experience. His first novel, *Uncle Tom's Children* was published in 1938 and *Native Son* was published in 1940. He saw beauty in the lives of everyday black folk and wrote in an angry, uncompromising voice that later, resurfaced in the literature of the writers of the 1960s. Blacks used art to prove their humanity and demand equality.

James Baldwin's literary career begins with the publication of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* in 1953. It is a graphic portrayal of life in Harlem. Black Drama also fully flourished in the 1950's. Lorraine Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, a Broadway play written by a black woman. The play won the 1958-1959 New York drama Critics Circle Award and also opened the doors of the larger theatre world for black playwrights. Another playwright who gained attention was Amiri Baraka, who wrote controversial off-Broadway plays.

Black Women Writers

Although black women have written since Lucy Terry's '*Bar Flight*', for more than a hundred years, their voices generally failed to gain currency similar to that which was achieved by black male writers. By the early 1970s, at the intersection of the black and women's Liberation Movements, this began to change. Although black men such as Charles Johnson,

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Walter Mosley, and August Wilson produced literary works of high merit, in the last two decades of the 20th century the works of women poets, essayists, dramatists, and fiction writers took the spot light in African American literature. The most significant contribution of this literature is its exploration of the themes of black women's experiences against the background of race and sex. These writers force readers toward a new understanding of the meanings of good and evil, strength and weakness, oppression and survival.

Fiction writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are among the best known, often acknowledged as two of the finest American writers of this century. Morrison has seen nine of her novels become classics. The basic principle that Walker highlights is 'the change in a person is linked with the change in the society'. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, for instance, demonstrates that the violence that the men and women and children of the Copeland family inflict on each other is the direct outcome of the internalization of racist hatred. They not only demonstrated the fact that these three sources of oppression existed in black communities, but also challenged the prevailing definition of woman in male-dominated American society, especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality

African Pinnacle

African American literature in America reached an artistic pinnacle in the period between the two World Wars with Harlem Renaissance. Since then African American writing has reached a high visibility; the themes have varied from highly emotional and political to private and introspective. The Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought acclaim and prominence to many African American Writers and fostered the growth of Black Studies. In 1980s and 1990s African American writes were working in many genres from script writing to poetry and the themes of African American writers consistently were found among the best sellers around the country.

Anthologies

James Emanuel took a major step towards defining African American literature; he has edited *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*, the first collection of black writings

released by a major publisher. Other African American Anthologies include Amiri Baraka's *Black Fire: an Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, Larry Neal's *The Negro Caravan*. Morrison helped to promote black literature and authors when she worked as an editor for Random House in the 1970s, where she edited books by such authors as Toni Code Bambara and Gayl Jones. Morrison herself would later emerge as one of the most important African American writers of 20th century; her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970.

Alice Walker wrote a famous essay that brought Zora Neale Hurston and her classical novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*, back to the attention of the literary world. In 1982 Walker won both the Pulitzer Prize and American Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple*. It tells the story of Celie, a young woman who is sexually abused by her father and then is forced to marry a man who physically abuses her. This novel was later made into a film by Steven Spielberg.

African American Literature in the American Mainstream

In the 1970's African American literature reached the main stream as books by black writers continually achieved best-selling status. African American writers also began to be accepted by academia as a legitimate genre of American literature. Today, African American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature with books such as *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Beloved* by Morrison that has reached both best-selling and award winning status.

Black Women Writers

The black male writers attempted in their writings to focus on the appalling condition of black women in the white society, but they failed to make any dent in the psyche of the black women in general and the white society in particular. With the publication of autobiographies by black women in the 1970s, the female version of the African American experience gained momentum, which was till then excluded from the black male writing. In order to be vociferous and to secure a significant place in society, the black women writers in the 1980s employed literary devices and fictional strategies which were basically anchored upon their consciousness.

The status of the black women writers is no longer relegated below the status of black males. Instead of being secondary to the literary dominance of black males, the literature of black women is expansive and what is more, liberating. Unlike in the past when women were supposed to be seen but not heard, the women of today are recognized writers in all fields and genres. Their perspective, which is consistent with the aesthetic, is faithful to the actual experiences of black women in America. As a result, we have in their works a woman-to-woman approach rather than a woman-to-man approach. It is, in brief, a black feminist aesthetic in which the form, language, syntax, sequence and metaphoric rendering of experience are markedly different and expansive in comparison to the male-authored literature. This can be meaningfully witnessed in the works of Morrison.

The African American women's literary tradition took a qualitative leap into the world of ontological transmutation of black women's existential conditions in America with Paul Marshall's first novel 'Brown Girl'. The novel opened the creative floodgates and black women's words poured forth from the depths of their souls in an undiminished stream. The creative outpouring indicated the coming of age of black women's literary tradition. The novel clearly demonstrates black women's determination to revise history, to carve out a place for themselves and to announce to the whole world their existence as 'a person and as a presence, as someone autonomous and as someone responsible to a community.' Unlike her predecessors, who spoke to others, Marshall's women speak to their own selves and try to articulate that self with a great force.

Equally impressive in number and talents are black women poets, dramatists and essayists of the 1980s and 1990s, many of whom were leaders at first for bringing change in the 1960s. These black women writers stretch their art to meet demands of their imagination; although grounded in the experiences of the entire black community, they are mostly concerned with the interior landscape of women's lives and express themselves in a variety of creative ways. For instance, poets Rita Dove, named Poet Laureate of the United States in 1994, Alice Walker, and June Jordan integrate their personal experiences and political goals to create multi-dimensional but unified selves.

Womanist Literature – Black Feminism

Two literary genres emerged during this second Black ‘Renaissance.’ ‘Womanist’ literature, a term used by the novelist Alice Walker to distinguish this trend from the white dominated feminist movement, and Black children's literature which will be examined later. ‘Womanist’ literature refers to literature that focuses on womanhood. Black women writers who have shaped this genre include: Alice Walker, Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Toni Cade Bambara. In 1983 Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was the first novel by a Black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize. Books in this genre include: Toni Cade Bambara; *The Black Woman* (1970), and Toni Cade Bambara; *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975), and *Midnight Birds* (1980).

With the emergence of black feminism in the 1970s, the development of black literature has changed greatly. Black feminists, on the one hand, attacked their white counterparts for seeing women as a 'universalized group.' Differences in race and class which black women confront are not taken into consideration by white feminists. On the other hand, the indictment of sexual injustice against their black male writers is lodged. As a result, black literature which has disfranchised and misrepresented black women requires re-examination. Black women are beginning to articulate their experiences and define themselves. Autobiography takes a new shape in their handling of the essays, especially the autobiographic books of Maya Angelou who read a poem at President Clinton's inauguration in 1993. Black women writers have come into their own in the last two decades of the 20th century claiming space and voice within the literary tradition from which they were excluded for many generations, and making African American literature richer than ever before. Other important writers in recent years include literary fiction writer Gayl Jones, Rasheed Clark, Jamaica Kincaid and John Edgar Wideman.

Realistic Presentation of the Suffering of a Race

Among 20th century novels, black novels have become widely popular for their realistic presentation of the suffering of a race. Since the reality narrated by the author acquires the characteristics of experimental reality as the reader visualizes the reality, while reading the black novel and feels as if it were his/her own experience, if destined to live in any foreign country. The concrete reality of the outside world dissolves into the conception of the mind of the author. It is nothing but objectified projection of subjective perception.

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The Parameters of Black Literature

It is essential to understand while reading black fiction, the parameters of the concept with which the writers embarked upon the narrative. If seen in the wider literacy perspective, the black fiction is a well laid out socio-political document dealing with black people in the white dominated social structure. The writer in the new school of literature becomes an insider, if his clan speaks for the race to which he belongs and its commitment is to be the voice for their society. By and large black fiction is written in the first person and the story is narrated as a perfectly authenticated account as if the whole narrative emerges from the writer's personal experience. Creation of meaningful situations and suitable narration make the whole piece of art close to reality.

African American black fiction is a good prose narrative and as a literature, it illuminates the experience of black Americans in a formal and distinctive manner, explains the pathetic condition of the forcibly settled race. At the same time, the fiction of the blacks explains the culture, belief patterns, practices and attitudes.

The slave narrative was the first black literary prose genre in the United States. It helped blacks in the difficult task of establishing an African American identity in white America, and it has continued to exert an important influence on black fictional techniques and themes throughout the 20th century. The search for identity, anger against discrimination, and a sense of living an invisible, hunted, underdog life, unacknowledged by the white majority have recurred in the works of such 20th Century black American authors such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Morrison.

The black novel is a text portraying the tension between the socio-cultural context and the psychological attitude which every black has experienced. In consequence, the text becomes a shared experience on a linguistic plane. It is a wailing literature, the coming into existence of a race in terms of sex, race and culture. The oppressive and hostile white American culture forced the blacks to search for dignity and identity to develop a unified self.

As a result, the black novel becomes a quest for identity for the fulfillment of individual potential by merging a divided, alienated self into a unified self-literature. But the Blacks in America had no significant place in the white society and they used to function as a synthetic whole without any line of demarcations. He saw his identity with his community, a state of existing in which he enjoyed blackness and took pride in it. He displayed enormous strength and fortitude of mind with a good potential for the resurgence of the self and his community as well. In view of his determined efforts to anchor a place in the white society, one can see an enhanced, expanded, intensified and deepened awareness of identity and unity.

As a literary exercise, black literature in general and the black novel in particular tend to be propagandist. In consequence, it also gets the label of being a racist literature. But the race that had suffered so far, seems to see no other alternative except to choose to put forth problems encountered in the white society and the treatment that they used to receive. Their aim is to create a homogeneous universal movement to impress upon the reading public their plight (which by now has drastically changed, and the new generation has to take advantage of the change) as well as seeking a place in the society with dignity and respect as individuals transcending barriers of race. As feminist critic Hortense Spillers put it,

The community of black women writing in the United States now can be regarded as a vivid new fact of national life (P.40)

African American language is very expressive and since its development, it has been used to articulate the emotions and aspirations of the group. Black speech has a collective orientation based on African American communal values. Speakers who are able to use the rhythms of the ancestors to verbalize the black condition become folk heroes for African Americans. Jesse Jackson, the late Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. are examples of this. The recorded speeches of these modern day prophets should be listened to, so students can appreciate and recognize the continuity of the African oral tradition.

A Celebration of Human Spirit

African American literature is a celebration of the human spirit. Black writers have used their skills to tell the world about the beauty and pain of Black life. African American literature in America tells a story that can be understood as a counter-narrative, an alternate story about black and white people that works against the dominant society's biased portrayals. As far as culture is concerned, black is rooted in his own culture but in the place of his living he wants to be like a white, a free man and a respectable individual. He is historically conditioned and evolves his identity, his religion, language, and literature. In other words, the roots of African American tradition do not suggest the emergence of any distinct social structure, but a network of social relationships of a group and the actions of the members that usually correspond to one another. He wishes to be a black, but at the same time an American as well, a product of the unique American situation; this is at present readily available and quite reachable for the blacks in America.

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Dr. B. Lakshmi
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Vel Tech Dr. RR & Dr. SR Technical University
Avadi
Chennai 600062
Tamilnadu
India giridharlakshmi135@gmail.com

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