

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION: A STUDY

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Dedicated to the peaceful souls of my revered parents

About the Author

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Acknowledgements

I am immensely indebted to my parents who encouraged and inspired me to read and write in English, to be one among the many and to develop and be prosperous. They are no more in this mortal world. My esteemed supervisor, Prof. Guru Charan Behera, Former Professor of English, BHU, Varanasi has motivated me throughout to comprehend the basics of knowledge system. Dr Ranjit Kumar Pati, Former Associate Professor of English, SKCG (Autonomous) College, Paralakhemundi, appreciates my idea of presenting the rudimentary concepts of African American Literary Tradition for the postgraduate classes of English. The staff members of Central library and particularly Chief librarian, Artatran Mahapatra offered a conducive atmosphere for the completion of the project. My wife, Anupama, son, Ansuman and daughter Adyansi are creating pleasant environment for extension of horizons of research and education.

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Preface

Post Graduate students of English of various universities have texts on American, African, Canadian and Indian Literature. The texts are prescribed in order to have a clear and unambiguous knowledge and understanding of themes and thoughts developed by the writers. Writers have their own viewpoints considering the history, society and political set-up of the period.

The present book encompasses the analysis and interpretations of the historical background of African American writings. The book focuses mainly on the most conspicuous African American literary trends and movements, the tradition of slave narratives, the Harlem Renaissance, the period of ethnic consciousness revealing the Civil Rights Movements, Movements of Black Arts and Black Power, the postmodern turn in African–American literature and neo-slave narratives. The major literary trends and movements as well as their main and influential representatives and their works are introduced in their historical and cultural contexts.

The chapters of the book are clear expositions of the historical framework and literary interpretations of the prominent writers of African –American literary tradition. The book has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter introduces the significance of fugitive and Ex-Slave narratives in the world literature. The writers present the plights and pathos of the slaves in various forms and techniques of writing. Chapter two exposes prominent movement on African-American race: Civil Rights Movement. This movement is a turning point in American social, political and cultural life. The third chapter reveals the

literary creations and intellectual reawakening of African-Americans in the district of Harlem. The fifth chapter presents the notable contributions of African-American women writers in contemporary periods. The last chapter is the visions of African American writers' today.

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Introduction

The African-American literary tradition implies the culture and tradition of suppressed people. The suppressed and oppressed people of African American race and society are placed in the literary writings of the writers. The writers exhibit the plights and pathos of the people with their artistic and creative expressions in the form of plays, poems, fictions and stories. The creations are well recognized in the intellectual scenario of the world.

The African American writers are socio creative artists. It is an artistic form directly emanated from the collective social situation in which the Afro-American found himself. It is directly connected to the historical, economic, educational and social growth and development of people and as such maintains a unique position in the literature of world.

The socio-creative art is what the black writers bring into existence when they sit down to reflect. They ponder on their grievous situations. Their artistic expressions are the results of their deep thoughts and critical analysis of their tragic circumstances. Their lives and their art in the same struggle.

Every black writer is a product and part of black community. When he addresses his audiences, he will be in part expressing the life and needs of their community. The frame of reference to which he relates is his community. They are what they are because of their peculiar nature of the people of the country.

The history of African American people is marked with slavery (1619-1865) which is characterized by continuous

dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation and exploitation. African Americans were viewed as people with no history, no cultural heritage, no tradition, and no identity in white America. For centuries Europeans and Americans advanced racial theories of inferiority, which ascribed African-Americans to the lower species and ignored their ownership of cultural, ethnic and linguistic values.

In an interview, one of the leading contemporary African American authors , Toni Morrison states that prejudice and racism against African-Americans had two purposes :It has been a distraction against recognizing the unfair class differences in the country , and it has united as Americans all other immigrants , who can claim to be white and therefore a part of mainstream simply because they are black.(Morrison,2008,53)However ,according to Morrison, America would not be what it is without the presence of black-America was ‘incoherent ’without the inclusion of African-Americans’ contributions to the forming of nation , its history , language, literature and culture(Christian ,2000,75)She presents a similar view in her book of essays on the presence of blackness in American literature *Playing in the Dark* (1992)in which she is trying to prove that Africanism is an inseparable part in defining Americanness. Thus Morrison views black American history as the history of whole American experience (Morrison, 1993, 14)

Slave trade was greatly related to racial prejudices and racial segregation. Although in 1865 slavery was abolished in America, the South was still governed by white politicians. Ku-Klux-Klan, an organization established in 1865, oppressed and terrorized the blacks. Racial inequality and stereotypes were

imposed on all aspects of black Americans' lives-education, literature, music and literature.

Black women had to face a twofold struggle because they suffered both racial prejudice and sexual abuse by the white masters and black males. African- women treated as slaves were depicted as animals and prostitutes. This treatment created the imposed derogatory images of black Jezebel. The numerous literary portrayals and treatment of black skinned people as the 'Other' by imposing negative meanings and stereotypes were meant to legalize hierarchical racialized system and justify oppression in a white hegemonic American society.

The negative stereotypes which defined and objectified them and which were internalized by many African-Americans (during the years of slavery ,until, Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement in 1960s)were their natural,inborndepravity,laziness,carelessness, irresponsibility, aggressiveness,illiteracy,docility, physical ugliness. In addition, Black women's uncontrolled sexuality, their passionate nature was used to justify black women's sexual exploitation. Thus the objectification of Black Americans and their internalization of stereotypes imposed on them allow one to speak about a 'racialized 'identity of African American people.

Tradition advocates essential values, verbal and written monuments, which defy time, and passed from one generation to another. Tradition has a correlation between preservation of cultural heritage and its innovation. Literary tradition is created by recurrent themes and forms of expression whereas innovation and experiments can only be recognized against the tradition and manifests through the principle of intersexuality.

The African American theorist, critic and writer, Henry Louis Gates Jr. claims the intersexuality is central to African American Literary Tradition. He emphasizes the similarities of African-American texts, especially genre forms and linguistic model which fall into these traditions, since writers have tendency to read and revise of the works of other writers. Therefore, repletion, careful study of previous cultural heritage, is reflected in the process of signifying, which marks the essence of African American literary tradition.

Gates goes on to claim, repetition and revision occurs with a signal difference. *Signification* manifests primarily through hidden textual meaning, African past and present. It is a combination of cultural memory, the African experience and cosmogony (the origin of universe, or a set of ideas about this). In the United States, the African tradition and experience was modified by the Christian one, a new type of culture and literature was formed. Uzieliene states that the intentions to define Afro-American literary tradition have always led to contradictory questions, such as:

What is uniquely Black or American about the literature by Black authors? What is the Black protagonist's identity- is it American or African –American? What is African –American identity? Is Black literature of a racial or a more universal nature? What does it mean to be Black in White America? Therefore, at the heart of the Black experience, there is the problem of double-consciousness. In the history of African-American literary tradition, there are two opposing cultural theories regarding the problem being confronted. One theory is “integrationist” and argues that the Black man must strive to

integrate into the American experience. It chooses priority of American values over the black ones. The other theory considers integration as impossible because America is not a homogeneous country to integrate into. Thus they speak in favour of group solidarity, ethnic independence and the “negritude” Historically, the African –American writer has always oscillated between these two aesthetic theories.

As an academic area, Afro-American studies first emerged during 1960s. Ethnicity and race appeared as an important new approach to literary study in the late 1960s and 1970s in America. Writers of different ethnic minorities –African-Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic American were considered with the problems of representing the experiences and the lives of the, ‘other’, and those who had been marginalized. Writers of many literary genres reflected on the conditions of the life of ethnic American minorities in a society that was dominated by white supremacy. Those years witnessed the rise of previously silent marginal groups characterized by racial, ethnic, gender, class differences as well as by sexual preferences.

There are few noticeable periods of Afro-American literary tradition: the early period (18th c.-early 1920s); the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1940) the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts (or Black Aesthetics) Movement of 1960s and 1970s. The postmodern moment in African-American literature started in 1970s and continues to the present day. One more conspicuous trend within the body of African-American literature is the African-American women’s literary tradition, the flowering of which in the 1970s and 1980s scholar and critic

Joanne Braxton characterized as the ‘Afra American Renaissance’ (Stein, 2009, 14).

Fugitive and Ex-Slave Narrative

A study of African –American literature and culture begins with the analysis of African –American oral tradition (which includes work songs, rhymes, jokes and riddles, spirituals, blues, legends, folk tales, in which they reflected on their own circumstances as an enslaved group, and the ‘call and response’ of spiritual leaders) The slave narratives (autobiographies, memoirs and reflections}which had a considerable influence on its formation and which comprise one of the most influential traditions in African-American literature and culture shaping the forms and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writing ,in both autobiography and fiction, in the history of USA.(Gray,2012,126)

Narratives of the fugitive slaves before the Civil War and by former slaves in the postbellum era are essential to the study of all 18th and 19thc. American history and literature. Autobiography became a dominant literary genre in the 18thc.In the us, ‘narratives of the escaped slave’ rose to prominence in the 3rd decade before the Civil War.

In defining the slave narrative, Gates claims that it grafted together the conventions of two separate literary traditions- the novel of sentiment (confessions) and the picturesque. Another great influence upon the slave narrative, according to Gates, is the African romance, as like in other American romantic models of narration. The language of the slave narrative is primarily an expression of self, a conduit for particularly personal emotion (Spikes, 1997, 59) thus the slave narrative as a literary genre combines the elements of the novel of sentiment, the picturesque, and the American romance. Generically the slave

narrative can be linked to a variety of forms-from 17th c. captivity narratives and 18th c. autobiography to domestic novel of the 19th c.

The general pattern of the slave narrative –an account of the life or a major part of the life , of a fugitive or former slave (written or orally related by the slave himself or herself)- documents of the slave’s harsh condition of life under slavery , the psysical,psychological ,moral and spiritual damage that he suffered from white “Christian” slaveholders, his acquisition of literacy, a certain crisis in his life and eventual escape from slavery and the South to the freedom of North is a leitmotif of the evolution of consciousness within the slave. The vast majority of the slave narratives titles have the subtitle of ‘Written by Himself or Herself’, as their authors felt authorship was important for their white readers of mid-nineteenth century.

Literacy and the ability of independent literary expressions were powerful ways to dispel the main proslavery myth that slaves were incapable of mastering the arts of literacy. In America of the middle of 19century literacy was a sign of social prestige and economic power. Many slave narratives have prefaces (sometimes appendices) and introductions by white amanuensis to prove that the black narrator has a good character and is reliable as well as to draw the reader’s attention to what the narrator will reveal about the abomination of slavery, and very few 19th century narratives have a preface by a person of African descent. However, in both cases the prefaces seek to confirm the veracity of narratives that follow them.

Despite their similar narrative features, the slave narratives have differences by the narrator’s experience, geographical

situation, public recognition etc. Morrison claims that they range from adventure packed life of Oloudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of life of Oloudah Equiano*, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself (1782) to the quiet desperation of Harriet Jacob's (Linda Brent's) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Written by Herself (1861) from the political slavery of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative the life of Frederic Douglass*, an American slave, written by himself (1845) to the subtlety and modesty of Henry Bibb's *Life and Adventure of Henry Bibb*, an American slave, Written by Himself (1849) (Morrison, 2008, 65-67)

A white Unitarian minister claimed that despite certain differences in slave narratives, the story that formerly enslaved ones had to tell had a universal value –these were stories of human struggle, stories of enslavement that actually proved to be stories of the essential importance of freedom, and they were stories ‘calculated to exert a very wide influence on public opinion’ (Graham, Ward, 2011, 95-96) Three major groups of slave narratives can be singled out:

1. Tales of religious redemption
2. Tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle
3. Tales of progress

From 1970s to 1980s, the slave narrative generally described a spiritual journey leading to Christian redemption. The authors usually characterized themselves as Africans rather than slaves. As most were born in Africa. These early slave narratives include accounts of brutality and deliverance and, as a critic notes, the pervasive metaphor of all life-writing of this

kind was the teleological journey—a purposeful trek from birth to death, which is ultimately redeemed spiritually and artistically by the guidance of Providence and the earthly agents of God. The masterpiece of early slave narrative which received international attention, is the aforementioned ‘The Interesting Narrative of the life of Oloudah Equiano’ which describes Equiano’s simple, pain and blissful life in his native land (Eden). The work interprets his captivity, the terror of the Middle Passage and the time spent in enslavement (the Fall), and recounts his attempts to become an independent man, his rising up from slavery, his learning to read, and his purchase of his freedom. Finally, Equiano experiences a religious vision, and is ‘born again’ to become one of ‘God’s children’ (Redemption). The narrator believes that all the good things of life are due to the workings of divine Providence. Equiano’s text established the form of the slave narrative and, indirectly or otherwise, it has influenced American writing in particular—to the present day. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano* is the first in great tradition of American narrative that juxtapose the dream of freedom with the reality of oppression.

From the mid-1920s, writers consciously choose the autobiographical form whose purpose was to inspire the abolitionist movement by recounting their hardship under slavery and the atrocities of the institution to a white audience. The two most exemplary autobiographical narratives of this type include Frederick Douglass’s (1817-1895) *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* and Harriet Jacob’s (1813-1897) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Fredrick Douglass, the most important 19c. African American writer and his *Narrative*, recognized not only as the most influential of all slave narratives but also one of the classic texts of African American, American and world literatures. Douglass's autobiography (mediated by white writer's abolitionists-one who wrote a preface, the other –a letter) belongs to the tradition of fugitive-slave narrative popular in the North before the Civil War. Douglass's autobiography follows the conventional narrative structure of most narratives written at the time: he provides a first-person account of his life spent in slavery, his learning to read and write, a turning point in his life which strengthened his determination to escape from bondage, his arrival in the North and eventual success as an orator, lecturer dedicated to a black liberation movement. We learn in the *Narrative* that while working for one of his white masters, Douglass finds the means necessary to be himself. The central moment in the *Narrative* is discovery .He recounts the cruelty who submitted everyone to unremitting work, starving and beating them, though he prayed and pretended to be devotional. Douglass recalls: 'I was broken in body, soul and spirit': the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed into a brute.'"(Douglass, 1986, 35)

But then came a turning point, an illumination which made him make up his mind to stand up for himself. Douglass reveals to the reader: 'You have seen how a man was made a slave, you shall see how a slave was made a man.' (Douglass, 1986, 47)The narrator remembers the time when his master tried to beat him and he resisted and describes this battle as 'the turning point in

my career as slave.’(Douglass, 1986, 47)It was the moment when Douglass was ready to express his selfhood, his sense of his own worth and dignity at the expense of his life if necessary. The incident, as he admits, revived within him a sense of his own manhood, and the departed self-confidence as well as a determination to be free. Douglass’s recovery of selfhood is described as his spiritual rebirth. After this Douglass spends four years in slavery and tells the reader about the ways the brutal and hypocritical slave system dehumanized not only the slave but also the master. Douglass’s text is not only historical-it also has literary value as he shapes his characters and circumstances to communicate his ideas about slavery. His other important works include *The Heroic Slave* (1853), which is considered the first novella in African American literature. *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederic Douglass* (1881)

An abolitionist speaker and social reformer Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography *Incidents* which was written under the pseudonym of Linda Brent gives her the reputation of the first woman to author a fugitive slave narrative in the US. Jacobs states at the beginning of her own book: ‘I was born a slave’-a classic opening of slave narrative. She continues, however in a different vein: ‘but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood, her comfortable life in a comfortable home where she lived together with her parents and a brother, as her father was allowed to have his own trade though they were all slaves-the thing she found out after her parents’ death and had to go not only through the general hardships of slavery, but also suffer sexual abuse of her white master.

One of the central themes of *Incidents* is betrayal of different kinds. Betrayal was the experience of Jacobs' great grandmother and grandmother who, when freed, were captured and sold back into slavery. Jacobs' dying mother was betrayed when her white mistress promised to set all her children free but did not keep her promise.

Jacobs' *Incidents* is not that different from Douglass's *Narrative*. And yet, there are differences in the general meaning and tone of the two works. In *Incidents* there is more emphasis on family ties, blood relationships within the black community, then there is in Douglass' story. In addressing the reader, there is more appeal to sentiment, to the reader's sympathy than to some abstract principles and feelings of anger. In *Incidents* women play more important role than men: heroic women, like Jacobs' family women and evil women who betray promises. The tale focuses on the female experience of slavery and thus uses the techniques of the sentimental novel as well as those of slave narrative. In the words of one critic, at the center of the narrative, is "that family protagonist of sentimental fiction: the young woman affronting her destiny-and, in due time, faced with a dangerous seducer (she became the object of her white master's sexual pursuit and to escape it, she became the lover of another white man and bore him two children)-the female orphan making her way in the world" (Gray, 2012, 132). In the episode of escape, Jacobs did not flee to the North (as Douglass did). Instead, she confesses to the reader, she hid in a small attic of her grandmother's house for seven years to be close to her children who lived there. Thus, unlike Douglass, Jacobs achieves personal freedom not in lonely flight, heroic battle, or recovering manhood, but in being with her family, even if

separation from them. However, after seven years of hiding she finally fled to the North where she was reunited with her children and had their freedom bought.

Other significant narratives of the period include a memoir and a slave narrative *Twelve Years a Slave, Narrative of Solomon Northup (1853)* *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself, 1849* –a slave narrative written by Josiah Henson, who later became famous for being the basis of the character of Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s cabin*, 1852, a slave narrative *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, by Mary Prince, 1831*- the first account of the life of a black woman which was published in the United Kingdom where she was living at the time.

After the defeat of the slave states of the Confederate South, the authors had less need to show the horrors of slavery and gave accounts of the narrator’s adjustment to the new life of freedom. The writers focused on the story of individual and racial progress rather than that of securing freedom. This period in African-American autobiographical literature is best represented by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)-the founder of Tuskegee Institute, a thinker, educator and the most prominent black leader of his day who succeeded Frederick Douglass as the chief African-American spokesperson. He became prominent for his attempts to improve the lives of recently freed Black Americans by involving them in the mainstream of American society. Washington is considered one of the most controversial of race leaders because of his often ‘accommodationist stance’. In contrast to his famous contemporary, African American

sociologist, historian and civil rights activist W.E.B.DuBois, who had a more confrontational attitude towards ending racial strife in America. Washington believed that Blacks should first prove themselves the equals of whites before asking for an end to racism.

Washington's most significant published work is his autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901) which is partly a slave narrative and partly a collection of speeches he had made in the years after the founding of Tuskegee Institute. The work gives an account of more than forty years of his life from slave to schoolmaster to the face of southern race relations. The word "Up" in the title emphasizes Washington's firm belief that African Americans can move upward if they use advantages of opportunities offered to them and work hard to achieve a place of substance in the world. As with many slave narratives or life stories, there are accounts of hardships of slavery, barrenness and desolation of the slave experience. However, what is unusual about Washington's account is that there are no any negative feelings about the institution of slavery or those who supported it. He does admit that slaves wanted freedom: 'I have never seen one who did not want to be free, or one who would return to slavery. 'However, unlike the authors of slave narratives who saw slavery as hell (especially Douglas), Washington tended to emphasize its educative role. Slavery, according to him, was that 'school' which helped prepare African Americans for the role they had to assume after the Civil War. He claims that "'thanks to the school of American slavery Negroes.....are in a stronger and more helpful condition , materially, intellectually, morally and religiously, than is true of equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe'

Washington stresses the big importance of education for blacks in achieving success. He describes his effort to instill manners, breeding, health, and a feeling of dignity to students. His educational policy emphasizes combining academic subjects with learning a trade. In this text, Washington achieves social and financial success through hard, manual labour, a good education, and his relationship with great people. The narrative is modelled on the archetypal American success story: a man (Washington) rises to prominence through his hard work, thrift, diligence and then reveals the secret of his success to his reader to enable him rise as well. Washington's book *Up from Slavery* was a bestseller, and in 1998 the Modern Library listed the book at number 3 on its list of the 100 best nonfiction books of the 20th c.

Other works of note which fall into the category of post-bellum 'Tales of Progress' are *The Underground Railroad Records* by William Still (1872) who is known as the Father of the Underground Railroad. Still carefully compiled and recounted the stories and methods of those who had helped escape to freedom via Underground Railroad and included them into the book. One of the few post-Emancipation published slave narratives is *From Darkness Cometh the Light* by Lucy Delaney, 1802, which is the first-person account of a successful 'freedom suit'.

This early period of African-American literary tradition can be characterized as the advancement of 'integrationist' theory of art. It can be argued, however, that this 'integration' was controversial as it had two aspects: positive and negative. As has been explored above, the aims of the authors of slave narratives

were to render their personal experience of being a slave, to give an accounts of dehumanizing nature of institution of slavery in the hope of reaching the hearts and minds of white readership, to show that black slaves were also human beings capable for perfection, by writing they asserted equality. The negative aspect of 'integrationist' theory was that a number of African American authors who wrote in the other literary genres sought assimilation. And to be able to assimilate the Black writer either to make his Black characters 'less black' or to depict Black people as whites wanted to see them. Some of the writers of the period (L. Dunbar, C.W. Chestnut, J.W. Johnson) reinforced the stereotypes of 'nigger': the contented slave or comic Negro, the exotic primitive who does not question his inferior status or brute. The character of the 'tragic mulatto' was the result of his wish to imitate whiteness, or 'to pass' his tragedy also lay in the fact that he could not completely fit in the white society or the black society and was equally scorned by both.

Harlem Renaissance Or New Negro Movement

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, social, and artistic explosion, a flowering in African-American life, and African – American intellectual reawakening in the 1920s which began in the New York district of Harlem and ended with Great Depression in the early 1930s , though many of its ideas lived on much longer. Although the movement of Harlem Renaissance included numerous black social thinkers, artists, jazz and blue musicians, it is best known for its literary productions. Broadly speaking, the Harlem Renaissance was regarded to be a re-birth of African-American art.

The Harlem Renaissance was inspired by the Great Migration. At the turn of 20th century; African Americans faced many factors that made them leave the South and move towards the North. These factors included great racist violence, suppression, natural disasters, and very few job opportunities. Migration from the American South to such big Northern cities as Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, or Washington D.C. opened up new economic opportunities ,especially when at the outset of World War 1 in 1917, many white men left their jobs and joined armed forces. The North was also a place which offered more cultural possibilities for those ‘who wanted to make African-American voice heard’(Gray,2012,476)

The Harlem Renaissance was also closely associated with the New Negro Movement which was as much concerned with the creation of a fresh American identity .The New Negro Movement was an effort to define what it meant to be African American by African Americans themselves. A crucially important event in African-American literature at the beginning

of Harlem Renaissance years was the publication of *The New Negro* established and edited by Allain Locke in 1925. Its contributors were men, women, and black and white people of all generations. This collection of literary works- fiction, poetry, drama by African Americans , essays on African-American art and literature alongside broader social issues , as Locke called it, ‘a spiritual coming of age’ sought to declare the growth of a ‘common consciousness’ among African –Americans and to show that ‘the American must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro’(Gray, 2012, 477), as well as described a new sense of racial pride, personal and racial selfhood, and claimed that black is beautiful.

Then how was the ‘Old Negro’ characterized ?As the writer A.Philip Randolph explained, the ‘Old Negro’ included political conservatism , accomodationist politics, opposition to organized labour, and dependence upon white benefactors who had nothing but disdain for the working class. They stood in the way of racial progress because of their involvement with the ‘old crowd of White Americans –a group which viciously opposes every demand made by organized labour for an opportunity to live better life’ (Bernard, 2011,273)

The Harlem Renaissance rejected the notion of the ‘old Negro’ and his self-hated. Negative images of black people were being replaced by the positive ones. The New Negro Movement sparked off debates about the relationship between race and art. And notwithstanding the fact that the black artists shared many ideas about the transforming power and future of the new negro and his role in the advancement African Americans’ social and cultural life. Langston Hughes was one of those Harlem

Renaissance writers who affirmed the notion of a purely black identity and claimed that black American experience lay in a direct line to the Motherhood (Africa). Whereas writers like Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer questioned the term 'black writer' itself, as they did not affirm the concept of black identity as such. And, indeed, what could Africa mean for African Americans with mixed ancestries and bloodlines or for those who had no direct experience of it and for whom Africa was only abstraction and blackness- puzzle? They envisioned an American identity that would transcend race. Thus some Harlem Renaissance writers claimed that a black writer's work should be restricted to his black identity and black experience, whereas others attempted to rise above their race and embrace more universal aspects of human experience.

Among the most prominent writers of the period were a poet, novelist, and short story writer Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, who worked in a great variety of genres. Poet Countee Cullen, fiction writers Zora Neal Hurston, Nella Larsen, fiction writer and poet Jean Toomer. In their work, they reconsidered black history and black identity, explored black folklore, the dialect forms of language and oral tradition. They attempted to explore the theme of Black experience using a new –modernist experimental and novel-artistic form. (Modernism was a dominant trend in literature and the arts both in America and Europe in the first decades of 20TH C.)

Folklorist, playwright, anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960) is considered an early feminist, a forerunner of African –American women's movement who inspired and influenced such contemporary African American

writers. In her works, Hurston was trying to make the point that a human being creates and defines himself through his art of speaking. In other words, she was convinced that individuals and communities ‘voice themselves into being, that they achieve identity and continuity through the telling of themselves’ (Gray, 2012, 481)

Hurston masterpiece *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) is a depiction of beautiful mulatto women’s maturation-discovery of her true identity. Her aim in this book was to revise and adapt vernacular forms to give voice to women: to create a genuinely democratic oral culture, or, as she put it, ‘words walking without masters’ (Gray, 2012, 481) as she had noticed that African-American women in particular were denied access to the pulpit and porch-the privileged sites of storytelling –and hence the chance of self-definition. The central character Janie Crawford concludes: Two things everybody’s got tuh do for themselves, they got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh themselves’ (Hurston, 1991, 34)

The irony is that she has to win the right to see and speak about living for herself. Janie has to resist the humiliating and stereotypes and definitions imposed on her by society as black person and a woman. She has to disobey the order of one of her husband’s not to engage in ‘porch talks’. What Janie has to do is to claim her own voice, and in the process of herself and rightful place in the vocal community. Her grandmother Nancy, an ex-slave tells her that ‘De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see’ (Hurston, 1991, 56) However, being dignified, Janie does not give up her desire to realize herself through two, through loveless marriages. She finally finds love and joy in her

third marriage as well as the opportunity to be her own self and to speak for herself. And although her marriage ends tragically-her husband dies a violent death, Janie is an already changed, singular and mature woman who can participate in ‘porch talk’ of the community. She has found her true speech and thus her true self.

Hurston’s other works of importance include the novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*(1934) in which a main character-a poet and a preacher-establishes his identity through art, a collection of African American folk tales, songs , games, and hoodoo practices :*Mules and Men*(1935)

African American culture contributed greatly to the rise of jazz in the 1920s what came to be called Jazz Age or the ‘‘Roaring Twenties’’ .Alongside with the extreme popularity of jazz music, the jazz age was marked by a glamorous life-style, the New York nightlife dominated by cabarets, buffet flats, ballrooms, speakeasies, night clubs such black performers as John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Bessie Smith and others. Many Halem Renaissance writers and artists were greatly influenced by jazz music (as well as blues) and employed elements of jazz in their work.

One of the many talented writers of Harlem Renaissance was Lanston Hughes (1902-1967) He was versatile and worked in many literary genres-poetry, fiction, drama autobiography. But it was his poetry that left an indelible mark in the African – American literature of the period. Hughes’s collection of poems that left an indelible mark in the African-American literature of the period. Hughes’s collection of poems *The Weary Blues*(1926), *Fine Clothes to the*

Jew(1927),*Harlem*(1942),*Montage of a dream Deferred*(1951), and *Ask Your Mama*(1961) reveal his deeply felt commitment to the idea of a separate and distinctive black identity that he spoke about in his influential essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*(1926) In the essay he wrote, ‘To my mind , it is the duty of the young Negro artist to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white’ hidden in the aspiration of his people , ‘Why should I want to be white? I am Negro –and beautiful’(Hughes ,1999,1025)Hughes was a socially committed poet and always stressed his devotion to black community and culture.

In many of his poems, Hughes employs elements of African –American jazz music, blues, spirituals, folklore, and colloquial speech. Hughes admitted that many of his poems had racial themes, and in many of them he tried to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. Hughes believed that essence of jazz that it was it was improvisational, subversive, and open ended and therefore challenged the closed structures of the dominant white culture.(Gray, 2012, 489)Hughes argued that jazz was heartbeat, ‘ this heartbeat is yours’. Jazz, as he saw it, was a vast sea ‘’that washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume with a steady old beat, or off-beat, ’And by the sea he must have meant the source of African American oral cultural tradition –spirituals, work songs, field hollers, and shouts as well as source of blues, ragtime, gospel, and roll that helped a release a myriad of feelings and emotions: joy, sorrow, pain, nostalgia and suffering. Jazz for Hughes was an act of rebellion. Some of the author’s best poems in which he incorporates rhythms, themes and vocabulary of jazz and blues include *Seven Moments*

in Love, Still here, The Weary Blues, The Cat and Saxophone, Montage of Dream Deferred.

The complex dilemma that Hughes presents in his essay *The New Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, is about whether one is a poet, or a Negro poet, that is, whether race is an essential feature or a social construct of a black writer's identity. How big is the difference between American and African American? The dilemma continues to exist in our own time and is reflected in the works of many contemporary African-American writers.

The artists and intellectuals of Harlem Renaissance had faith in the future of 'New Negro', they believed in democratic reforms and in the power of art and literature to effect these changes. However, Harlem Renaissance ended with the start of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, which questioned the importance and centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities.

The Civil Rights Era And The Black Arts Movement (Black Aesthetic) (1960s-1970s)

The 1960s can be considered a turning point in the American social, political and cultural life. The emergence of counterculture, anti-war movements, the movement of ethnic minorities, women's liberation movement, the Feminist Revolution, the Civil Rights Movement which caused widespread civil unrest in the country. The assassinations of president John Kennedy, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights Activist Malcom X made Americans reconsider sets of values they had adhered to before.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, African-American poets, literary critics, and theorists produced a large body of works which reflected the spirit of self –determination and African-American expressive culture. Two seminal books *Black Power:An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*(1968) and *The Black Aesthetic*(1971) were published which included the work of creative artists and intellectuals who committed themselves to produce artistic and cultural works to black audiences.

The former work had especially powerful effects upon the black audiences when it was released in 1960s. The contributors in the collection seemed to embody the spirit of rebellion and revolution all over the country when black people rioted in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. The anthology illustrates the idea of Black experience revitalized in the powers of Soul, which dissolves the boundaries between art and life. (Morrison, 2008, 54)

Negritude and Saul reflect a special concept of African-American spiritual condition, the ever changing state of art and soul, the rejection of western dichotomies of reason vs. heart, concrete vs. abstract, action vs. thinking, individual vs. group etc. Some literary works published in two anthologies had a racist, militant and nationalistic character. For instance, Malvin X (Marvin E. Jackmon) ends his poem "The Old Time Religion" with the line "LET THERE BE BLACKNESS OVER THE LAND/LET BLACK POWER SHINE AND SHINE". Another author addresses a white authority figure by saying "Man, your whole history / Ain't been nothing but a hustle". And Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoy Jones) who was considered Father of the Black Arts Movement, wrote: "The Black man is the future of the world" "Let black people understand that / they are the lovers and sons of lovers/and warriors and sons of warriors". In a poem called "Black Art", he says "we are black magicians, black art/and we make in black labs of the heart/.....we own the night" (Gray, 2012, 641). These nationalist and confrontational statements as well as an emphasis on the superiority of blackness, black pride and black aesthetic, were characteristic of many African American writings during 1960s and 1970s. The bulk of this kind of writing is permeated with race pride.

The artists of the Civil Rights Movement period Richard Wright (1908-1960), James Baldwin (1924-1987) Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) try to balance between the demands of being a black writer and various tensions. They present "Black Material", however, at the same time they tend to move away from racial focus in literature and try to stress the universal human experience, pointing out the fact that an artist can reveal, or at least attempt to reveal the experience of all people.

Wright's *Native Son*, (1940) Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) enriched the African-American literary tradition with philosophical and existential depth. Their works highlight themes of black man's alienation, discrimination, and humiliation in white society, however, at the very center of their fiction is a character's loss of identity and his desperate attempt to discover his true self, and in case of failing to do that, at least 'invent' himself.

In his two autobiographical work, *Black Boy* (1945) and *American Hunger* (1977), Wright traces his life from childhood in his native South to adulthood in the North—a journey in search for identity. For Wright, identity was a social and cultural construct, not natural: it had to be won, struggled, and suffered for. He believes that all African-Americans had been denied a similar knowledge. In *Black Boy*, he speaks about 'the cultural barrenness of black people', 'the essential blackness of black life in America' Wright claims that the most severe blow they received from white society was their exclusion from a sense of fully being in the world. However, the author believed that he had made himself. He realized his blackness, his belonging to the black race when at the same time he managed to go beyond the restrictions of race.

Wright's most important book was the novel *Native Son*. The protagonist of the novel—an uneducated black youth—mistakenly kills his white master's daughter, burns her body, and murders his black girlfriend, fearing she will betray him. Fear is the emotional condition of character's life. This second act is seen as the product not of will, but of circumstance and violence it engenders. Waiting in the prison for his trial, the protagonist

feels free for the first time in his life as he, he believes, he has broken out of prison of himself. He finally comes to realize his emotional state as well as his motives, reasons for his violence and arrives at the conclusion that ‘what I killed for, I am’. Thus he realizes his true essence and identity.

In Wright’s later works, there are noticeable traces of existentialism, for instance, in the novel *The Outsider* (1953) which centers on a young black intellectual’s search for identity. In his later non-fiction works, *Black Power* (1954), *White Man Listen* (1957) there is a move towards Black Nationalism. The writers of Black Aesthetic of the 1960s considered him their forerunner, as they saw his militancy and the willingness to use art as weapon. Wright argued, however, that although black writers’ mission was to influence ‘human affairs’ with their art, writing had certain professional autonomy. He was convinced that if a literary work is too didactic, the artistic sense is submerged. For him, literature is coextensive with life, but they were not to be confused with each other. Every first rate novel, poem or play ‘lifts the level of consciousness higher’. Thus, according to him, imaginative writing was a vital agent of awareness and luminous revelation of change-an enabler of life (Gray, 2012, 502-3)

In the genre of prose, Ellison’s only novel *Invisible Man* was a highly original and important event in the history of African-American literature since World War II. The central theme of the work is the black protagonist’s search for identity and individuality both as African –American and a human being. It is an account of a young black’s awakening to racial discrimination and his battle against the refusal of white

Americans to see him apart from his ethnic background, which in turn leads to his humiliation and disillusionment. The novel set in 1930s, and describes, the experiences of its anonymous protagonist (who is also the narrator) as he travels through America in search of his identity trying to cope with the dilemma that Ellison summed up in one of his essays : ‘the nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are’ (Gray, 2012, 652) The main metaphor of the novel is human invisibility. Firstly, white society ignores the individuality and humanity of black and views them as stereotypes. They are exploited and their needs are disregarded. Thus the black Americans become invisible. Secondly, the protagonist is white oriented and feels inferior and ashamed of his dark skin colour. Thus he is part of the crowd of people who comply with the rules and custom prescribed by white society. All throughout the novel, the Invisible Man forms his life according to other people’s life models, imitates them and refuses to question his own choices and preferences. Therefore, he ignores his own responsibility in his development and acknowledgement as a visible man.

Contemporary African-American Women Writers

The emergence of feminist views in 1970s highlighted the essence of African American women's literature, which was not regarded as noteworthy before. African –American women's literary tradition is marked by common themes such as racial and gender inequality, fate and condition of black male and female writer, the peculiarities of the formation of black woman's identity , her search for selfhood, her position and roles in the a multicultural society, and black woman's consciousness.

In the 1970s women began to openly express their experience as both suppressed women and members of minority group. The black women writers of the period-Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Shirley Anne Williams, Gayl Jones-explored the issues of their problematic position and struggle for liberation in a racial and mainstream culture. Their works marked a significant shift in African American literature. As Cathrine R.Stimpson states, black women writers also claimed for rejection of male power over women, the deconstruction of dominant images of black women, and the need for women to construct their own experience , history and identity.

The most representative black female writers of recent periods include Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou who continue such central themes in African –American women's literary tradition as female friendship, search for and discovery of identity and community, racial oppression and sexual violence , the importance of ancestry.

The literature of former and recent African-American women writers provide a comprehensive view of black women's struggle to form positive self-definition in the face of derogatory images of black womanhood. African-American woman's experience of internalized oppression has been the prominent theme in African American women's writing. Critic E.Shelley Reid claims that such contemporary African American women writers as Morrison and Walker in their fiction mark a pivotal change in African-American literary tradition because they have been transforming the strategies used by earlier African American novelists who not only challenged negative images imposed on black women but employed an innovative style of writing such as interlocutory dialogic style' and giving voice to 'multiple characters through multiple settings in time and place'.

Hence, it is right to say that contemporary women writers not only African American women's literary tradition but they also enrich this tradition with new elements making it more significant. In their works, African-American writers of recent periods revisit the historical past and African-American tradition and experiment with postmodern techniques in an attempt to express their attitude to intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

Toni Morrison (1931) is one of the leading American novelists, an essayist, a literary critic, the first African American woman writer who was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Morrison grew up in a spiritual family that greatly cherished black culture. Thus, storytelling, songs, folk tales were formative elements of her childhood that she later incorporated in her book.

Among the themes of Morrison's writings are the damage that racial violence brings to black cultural tradition, and means by which African Americans must preserve their heritage. Only two of her novels-*Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008)-are set in the years of slavery. In her other works the writer shows the effects of slavery upon the psyche of black people who have never experienced it directly and suggests the idea that in order to understand the present, it is necessary to reconsider the past, embrace it and learn how to live with it. One of the best examples that illustrates this idea is *Beloved* which is based on true story of a runaway slave who at a point of recapture, kills her infant daughter, who does not want to be sold in slavery, and is later in torment by feelings of guilt. And only when she relieves and reconsiders the act of murder and finally forgives herself, she achieves liberation.

Morrison's other themes include the experience of black women, female friendship, motherhood, classes between black and white, a black man's violence, and thus their acceptance of the models of white society and stereotypes imposed on them. The protagonist of Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola is shaped by white standards of beauty and longs to have blue eyes, as she thinks if she becomes beautiful, she will be loved. In this novel, the author explores the influence of white ideals of beauty on black female identity showing that it may be destructive. The novel poses the questions: 'What is physical beauty?', 'How do we learn to form self-image?' and explores the pain of wanting to be somebody else.

One more important theme of the writer's work is a quest for identity. The characters (Milkman Dad in *The Songs of*

Soloman (1977) discover their true selves in searching for their origins. Sula in the novel *Sula* (1973) tries to create her identity outside the community but unfortunately, falls. So, the thematic structure of Morrison's works are very colourful. Her other novels include *Tar Baby* (1981), *Jazz* (1992) *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008) *Home* (2012) *God Help the Child* (2015)

One of the prime concerns of black women playwrights in America is the black family or African continuum. Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ntozake Shange view the black family through very new and wide lenses, but allow them to enlarge this social unit to include not only blood related individuals, but also person linked by race, culture, heritage and shared ancestry. This interactional family, one that connects black peoples all over the world, informs, reinforces, inspires, and empowers blacks to survive the worst possible odds. To approach the black family, in America and elsewhere, as the progeny of Africa is to give credence to its wholeness. A close examination of the selected plays of these authors reveals that the portraits of black family are varied, but the message remains constant: an indissoluble and intimate bond that fortifies and preserves the integrity of black family

Childress, Hansberry, and Shange insist that the black family is viable and stable, and does have a heritage beyond slavery. Their plays uniquely demonstrate that the black family in America is indestructible and regenerative almost solely because of the strong bond that exist between African Americans and their immediate and distant past. In redefining and broadening the black family, the playwrights clearly point out

that black people have common history, a common set of reactions to the white world and a common destiny.

The black families in the plays Childress, Hansberry and Shange are headed by women and transplants from South to North, are severely disadvantaged, and are active seekers of survival strategies. They are bound by tradition and history, the social scientists contend that black families of the types portrayed in these plays are disorganized, pathological, and disintegrating. Eleanor Engram, in *Science, Myth and Reality: The Black Family in one half Century of Research* concludes that the families headed by women with children are likely to be the poorest of all. Of all black families below the official poverty level, 75 percent are families of women with children.

A study of the plays of Childress, Hansberry and Shange reveals a preoccupation with blacks turning to Africa for identity and viewing blacks around the world as family. In nearly all of the plays, there are numerous references to Africa as homeland and wellspring of strength. There is little doubt that these playwrights see African Americans as part of African continuum.

Alice Childress' portrait of black family comes closer to the images discussed by social scientists who claim that black family is alive and well. Childress writes about the downtrodden who turn the absolute horror of living in poverty and in untenable emotional conditions into an extraordinary demonstration of dogged determination. Some indomitable black families have sprung from Childress' keen awareness that a spirit is almost impossible to break.

The family in Childress' *Florence*, is attenuated, with Mrs Whitney as the head of the home in which she her daughter , Marge and the son of her second daughter , Florence live. Mrs Whitney , rather than see her grandson reared in urban ghetto, takes on the responsibility of rearing him while Florence goes North.

While Mrs. Whitney wait to board the train for New York to encourage Florence to come home, she urges Marge to go straight home to care for the boy. She reminds Marge that Florence's son misses his mother a great deal, Mrs. Whitney is not above humbling herself to ask for son, Rudley, for money to keep the family together. Her commitment to her family is evident in her talks with Mrs. Carter, the white actress heading for New York. She tells her that she has always lived as best she knew how and raised her children properly. She even boasts that she has fine family. She is proud of the morals and values she has imparted to her children. She is especially pleased about the closeness she shares with Florence. The mother-daughter relationship in this play is built on mutual trust and support. Childress' family in *Florence* is poor but dignified, loving, supportive and strong.

Alice Childress' *Wine in Wilderness* contains several different images of black family. She seems particularly sympathetic to women who are forced to head homes. This empathy stems from the fact that 'in a fatherless home, the mother carries multiple burden: as the head of the family, as breadwinner, as homemaker, as mentor, comforter, and caretaker of children. Childress' sensitivity is best seen when Tommy, in the play, reveals her family's impoverished background. "We

did not have nothin' to rule over, not a pot nor a window. And my papa picked himself up an run off with some finger poppin' woman and we never hear another word til' ten, twelve years later when a undertaker call up and ask if mama wants claim his body.''' {75)

Childress focuses on the fact that Tommy's mother, in spite of living in contemptible poverty, did best her to provide the bare essentials of family. The struggle for survival is evident when Tommy recalls the pain up growing up as a black girl in Virginia. She reveals that when she was a girl, she despised coming home to hunger and anguish. The conditions were such that Tommy was forced to quit school to help for the family, a fact that social scientists have found to exacerbate the plight of black family because all too often poverty breeds illiteracy. Childress, however, chooses the least educated character in the play to teach humanity to those holding college degrees.

Childress subtly links the concerns and conditions of black family in *Wine in Wilderness* to those of the larger family. The play opens during a Harlem riot, characteristic of turmoil surrounding the Black Consciousness Movement. The play depicts the grass-roots blacks across the country who are looting, burning, and injuring innocent people. Childress suggests that when one black family in Harlem or anywhere else in America goes hungry, it is a personal affront to all blacks. Bill Jameson opens himself up to criticism when he says that black folks are not altogether. He claims that masses have no plan or strategy and will continue to get their heads whipped and bodies broken. Tommy becomes the spokesperson in her response to Bill. She tells Bill that may be what everybody needs is somebody like

him, who knows how things should go. She goads him to get out there and start some action to lead revolution. Tommu's urgings illustrate the political climate and views held in common by many blacks of 1960s.

Numerous references are made to Mother Africa in Childress' play. John O' Killens, in *The Literary Genius of Alice Childress* argues that she seems particularly concerned that blacks see themselves as an integral part of the larger African family and that blacks change the negative images that they have of themselves. Killens points out that blacks' low self-concept is a result of years of conditioning in a racist patriarchy. He suggests that Childress' primary and special concern has been the African image. She knew that black was beautiful when so many of us thought that Black beauty was the name of a storybook horse, a figment of writer's fantasy.

Lorraine Hansberry's plays center around, like those of Alice Childress, the black family. Hansberry's family in *Raisin in the Sun* is typical because it transforms from an attenuated nuclear family, with Mama Younger as the head of the household, into simple extended family, with Walter Lee and Ruth as joint heads of the household.

Early in the play, Hansberry sets up Mama younger as powerful and unyielding mother whose preoccupation is with keeping her family together while fending off the meanness of ghetto. Mama and her daughter do not have ideal relationship. Often flighty and arrogant, Beneatha is kept in check by Mama who reminds her what will not be tolerated in the home. One example of Mama's firmness is when she slaps Beneatha hard across the face for saying that she does not believe in God.

Mama, blinded by so sacrilegious statement, forces Beneatha to repeat after her, 'In my houses, there is still God' (39) Driving home the point that she is the head of the house, Mama with quiet dignity says: 'There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am the head of the family. (39)

Beneatha, who has inherited her mother's willfulness and independence, is not easily slapped into submission. There is a constant tug-of-war between the two. When Beneatha calls Walter Lee a toothless rat for gullibly losing the family's inheritance, Mama again orchestrates what can be said or felt in the house. Though she is commanding and overbearing, she gently teaches Beneatha that a person needs love the most when 'he is at his lowest and can't in his self cause the world done whipped him so'(125)

Beneatha is not always without fault in her relationship with her mother. She is quick tempered, flippant, and sometimes condescending, as is the case when she cautions her mother about asking ignorant questions of her African friend, Asagai. Though the mother –daughter pair banter back and forth, they are very close and do confide each other. As much as Mama has reprimanded Beneatha, she has pampered her as well. When Beneatha tells Mama that she will be late coming from school because she is starting guitar lessons, Mama gently chides her for the myriad of short-term hobbies she has abandoned: acting classes, horseback riding and photography.

One main trait that Mama and Beneatha share is their propensity for degrading Walter Lee. Despite Mama's harsh hand, Beneatha and Walter Lee seem only to know how to insult each other. Perhaps their inability to be civil to each other, is a

reaction against the oppressive conditions that keep them in ghetto. Walter Lee thinks that Beneatha is a spoiled little brat who is trying to manipulate their mother into turning over to her the bulk of the insurance money for medical school. Beneatha, on the other hand, sees Walter Lee as weak and worthless. There is a great deal of bickering between this brother and sister. Walter Lee antagonizes Beneatha the minute she walks into the room by saying, 'You a horrible looking chick at this hour.' (23) A while later, Beneatha snidely remarks, 'I dissected something that looked just like yesterday.' (24) When Walter Lee tells Ruth that no one understands his dream, Beneatha quips, 'Because you are nut, Thee is mad, boy' (26). At another point, Beneatha levels the ultimate insult at her brother: 'I look at you and I see the final triumph of stupidity in the world' (118). Clearly, Hansberry is making the point that when people are drowning in their own unfulfilled dreams due to psychological and economic impoverishment, it is difficult to express love.

Lorraine Hansberry is acutely aware of the importance of memories and looking back in order to move forward. Not only Hansberry resurrect the spirit of Walter Lee's father, but she summons African ancestral spirit to serve as dim light of hope and strength to help the black family survive in America. Hansberry was an eager pupil of her uncle, William Leo Hansberry, one of the world's famous scholars of African antiquity, and Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, whose seminar on African history she completed. Robert Nemiroff contends that Hansberry was on fire with black liberation not only here but in Africa. Nemiroff recalls a Hansberry's speech in which her vision embraces two continents:

The foremost enemy of the Negro intelligentsia of the past has been and in a larger sense remains ----isolation-----The unmistakable roots of the universal solidarity of the coloured people of the world are no longer ‘predictable’ as they were in my father’s time-----And I for one ---as a black woman in the United States in the mid-Twentieth century feel that the ultimate destiny and aspirations of African people and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever. (24)

An insurgent with a vision for solidarity, Hansberry wrote with a sense of immediacy and power.

Like the works of Childress and Hansberry, Ntozake Shange’s writings reveal a preoccupation with blacks as an integral part of African continuum. Shange’s own connectedness to Africa is evident in her name change from Paulette Williams to Ntozake Shange, which was a deliberate act of protest against her western roots. Shange insists that her background shaped her view of interconnectedness of African Americans and other people of colour:

My parents have always been especially involved in all kinds Third World culture-----I was always aware that there were different kinds of black people all over the world because my father had friends from virtually all of the colonized French, Spanish, and English speaking countries. So I knew I was not on this planet by myself. I had some connections with other people. (24)

Shanges’s sketches of family are comprised of feeling and thinking people .In Claudia Tate ‘s *Black Women Writers at Work*, Shange explains that a dramatic piece “ should bring new

person into life , somebody to whom you can refer, even have a conversation with, because you ought to get to know them well.” (29) These feeling persons are not always sensitive to each other.

One of the poems in Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, makes a poignant statement about the African continuum. One sees a sense of ancestral pride when lady in brown speaks of Toussaint L Ouverture : ‘he was dead and livin to me /cuz Toussaint and them/ they held the citadel against the Frenz/(27) In the *Toussaint* poem, Shange describes this folk hero as one who fought to free blacks in Haiti, a man whose source of emotional and physical strength was drawn from his distant African past. Armed with the knowledge of Toussaint’s great struggles for the freedom of blacks and wishing to emulate this legendary figure, the persona attempts to free herself from her ‘integrated home, integrated street, integrated school.’(27) The persona eventually joins with Toussaint Jones, a scruffy little black boy, who symbolizes strength and courage in Black America. Shange’s uniting of these two implies that together they will stand firm against racism in America.

Childress, Hansberry and Shange cannot be accused of writing only about domestic, narrow issues. Their scope, instead, is at once local, national and global. Their writings reveal a preoccupation with Africa, which shapes the content, conflicts and tone of the bulk of their works. The family is the vehicle that allows these three women to express their feelings about the joys and sorrows facing the progeny of Africa.

All three of the playwrights have written about black families that, regardless of many problems or obstacles, have

survived and sometimes succeeded. One of the most important reasons why black families have been able to withstand slavery, reconstruction, urbanization, unemployment, and poverty because of their adaptability of family roles. Where blood related members of black family create voids, the interactional or fictive members of family provide the spirit, the history, and the courage that blacks need to sustain themselves in American society. The study of black women writers have drawn, consciously and intuitively, to solidify the African American family. Childress, Hansberry and Shange speak of the drums that beckon and prompt them to write of the heartbeat and rhythms of people whose single most important force is safety and security of the progeny of Africa in the African-American family system.

Conclusion

The vision of African American studies has undergone a major transformation with the passage of time. The strategy and approach of writers focus on the questions concerning the survival of blacks in contemporary times and their future prospects. The writers highlight the dreadful white reality that holds a modern black captive and victim. Ed Bullins, a significant figure in African American Drama exerts a substantial impact on the subsequent development of African American dramatic tradition. Presently, Black writers turn away from addressing anticipated readership and appealing the plight of blackness in America. The Black literature has changed from a social-protest oriented to one of the dialectical nature of blacks-Black Dialectics. This new thrust has two main aspects: dialectic of change and dialectic of experience. These are the two major fields in the mainstream of new Black creativity. The dialectic of change, once called protest writing when confronting whites directly and angrily, altered to what was called Black revolutionary writing. The dialectic of experience is the writings of being of being a black. These writings emerge from the painful and precarious situations of Blacks.

In 1970s, there was a burst of literary activity in African American literature: twenty-five novels, major dramatic works and volumes of poetry were released. This even has been called by some critics the beginning of second renaissance in of black women's writing. , whereas others consider this movement as the emergence of black literary postmodernism. Black postmodern literature shares many features common to all postmodernism-it

is characterized as self –conscious, self-reflexive, and it first of all aims to revise history, identity and aesthetics.

One of the aims of postmodern African-American literature is to provoke critical self-reflexion about the demands for racial representation that have been historically placed on black writers. From its beginning of 19th c, slave narratives and all black literature have been expected to realistically depict the race-African Americans-and speak about their experiences as a whole. Postmodern African-American writers self-consciously revise the dominant traditional literary forms of racial representation by parodying these forms and revealing them to be textual constructs, and not true –to-life reflections of black life. Since 1970s there has been a growing interest in the historical past as well as the implication of this post-Civil Rights explorations of black identity. It should be noted that it was the Black Arts Movement of 1960s that introduced a cultural redefinition of blackness that was in part responsible for the literary innovations of postmodern African –American authors. However, these authors also rejected Black Arts ideals of racial identity and community. Literary and cultural critics broadly agree that postmodernism in the African-American context is defined by a heightened attention to the intra-racial differences of class, gender, and sexuality that had been suppressed in black cultural nationalist discourse.

As far as dominant postmodern paradigms of identity and aesthetics are concerned, a number of innovative formal strategies were used in an attempt to represent a post-1970s black ‘polyconsciousness’ in literature. These formal strategies include textual fragmentation, (which reveals a character’s split

consciousness, or polyconsciousness, his fragmentary mind) linguistic bricolage, and the transgression of generic and cultural boundaries.

Postmodernism questions the idea of objectivity and objective truth especially historical truth. How do we know that what is fact and what is fiction? Postmodern writers working in the genre of novel revise significant points of history by critically rewriting traditional narrative forms, especially slave narratives and narratives of migration. They often use parody to show the unreliability of the official historical account of slavery. Such novels are referred to as works of historiographic metafiction (a genre of postmodern novel).

Historiographic metafiction raises the question: “How do we know the past?” and acknowledges the need to question the received versions of history. It does not seek to tell the truth but considers the questions of whose truth gets told. It questions the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. In postmodernism, both history and fiction are treated as cultural sign systems, ideological constructions. Historiographic metafiction reflects the postmodern view that we can know reality only as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations.

In 1960s, the historical archive of slavery expanded, and this inspired the literary works of realist historical novels of slavery that drew on oral traditions. It is a way of recovering the subjective experience of slaves. The first African American novel which dealt with the return to the historical moment of slavery was Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) - a literary adaptation of her great grandmother’s oral tales of slavery. From

1970s onward, there have been several major texts of the slave narrative told from the first and third person point of view of the slave himself or herself. Barbara Chase Riboud's novel *Sally Hemings* (1979) about Thomas Jefferson's longtime slave mistress, with whom he had several children. Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) and Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) are the fictions of similar genre.

Contrary to the aforementioned novel, most neo-slave narratives experiment with narrative form and voice to examine the legacy of slavery which continues into 20th century. As an example, one can mention Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), which tells the story of escaped slave Margaret Garner. Here the author employs postmodern techniques such as fragmentation of linear time to piece together traumatic memory, what Morrison's characters call 're-memory'. The novel's concern with temporality is a striking manifestation of specifically African American expression of postmodernism.

Other novels that illustrate this particular approach to time and trauma include Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) which is considered the postmodern slave narrative in her use of time –travel device. Timothy Spaulding defines postmodern slave narrative as 'that proliferating sub-genre of twentieth –century novels of slavery that violate the conventions of narrative realism'. He goes on to explain that 'the break from realism in recent narratives of slavery disrupts the governing protocol of historical representation, in particular calling into the question the positivist truth-claims of modern historiography.' (Spaulding, 2005, 18-19)

A number of African –American writers in the post-1952 fictional creation look to the South for imaginative inspiration. This kind of fictional creation has been called the neo-slave narrative, a term first coined by Bernard Bell. Ashraf Rushdy's book *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social logic of literary form* (1999) provides the most comprehensive study of the genre to date. Rushdy defines the neo-slave narrative as that body of contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative. For some authors, slavery serves as a textual layer to their fiction, whereas for others, slavery is the incentive for their literary creations.

The writers of neo –slave narratives, in which the characters experience slavery directly and chronologically with it, reveal new aspects of the condition of slaves (during and after slavery), of the relationship between black selves and their masters, between a black female slave and her white master and a white mistress, and between the blacks themselves. The significant and creative authors of the neo-slave narratives show instances of black slaves' resilience and defiance against their white masters, mutual sexual desire of persons who could be attracted to each other inspite of race, class, or previous condition of servitude, the possibility of black female slave's friendship with a white woman and attractive black women on plantations as well as the black woman's jealousy towards the white woman who becomes the mistress of the black man she loves.

African –American literary tradition has evolved into new form and scale. The writers strengthen the tradition with emerging and developing thoughts and expressions in forms of

writings. It has appealed the readers all over the world. This is the major field of research in institutions of greater eminence.

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