

**ROLE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS IN THE UPLIFT
OF THEIR COMMUNITY**

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Abstract

Women's contribution to the growth and development of human civilization has always been great. Black women in white cultures are generally assigned stereotyped roles. African American literature has examined the problem of racial discrimination in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects. The development of African American Women's fiction is a mirror-image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in America. Black women used their writing as a platform to champion the causes of their entire sister women. Their writings paved the path for emancipation of their lot.

The paper will further discuss about the role of women writers right from to the time of slavery to contemporary to uplift their community and expose the harsh realities through their pen.

Women's contribution to the growth and development of human civilization has always been great, though it has never been fully recognized historically. Ancient civilizations of Europe, Asia and Africa have been testimony to the fact that men alone, without the support of their female counterparts, would have never been able to accomplish what they ultimately did. Black women in white cultures are generally assigned stereotyped roles- the mammy figure. Mammy is black in color, fat nurturing, religious, kind, strong and enduring. She relates to the world as an all embracing figure, and she herself needs, or demands nothing. She is a surrogate mother of white children.

African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture. African American literature has examined the problem of racial discrimination in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects.

It was only during the mid twentieth century after the ground breaking influential socio political and cultural emancipation paved the way for African Americans to know themselves and uplift their community. The black male authors themselves rarely depicted black women differently. The emergence of African American Women writings brought in double jeopardy of racism in Black Women's movement. Their immediate concern was to depict racial discrimination rather

than to project gender issue. This has made many black women to turn toward each other for a better introspective and analytical understanding of Black Women's problems.

Black women were denied of all privileges in the society. They were the dual victims of racism and sexism. This "double jeopardy" has created a complex painful and dehumanizing reality in which they have struggled for freedom and selfhood. Black women have always been suppressed. They do not have their own identity except a few in the women's history who are extraordinary personalities such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Francis Harper and others. From the beginning the reality of black women in America was shaped by the synergistic relationship of race, sex and class. During slavery they were workers first, women second and always black and these three identities locked them into positions of vulnerability. After the abolition of slavery, they continued to be exploited as blacks and as women in the labor market and in the home.

The development of African American Women's fiction is a mirror-image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in America. African American women writers emerge from a particular historical context: a context where they were oppressed hundreds of years together. Through their writings the authors create a self-affirming protagonist; protagonists who are able to discover their inherent divinity. This spiritual awakening enables these characters to emerge from the context of oppression and at least begin to assert, if not achieve their innate potential.

African American women literature has undergone a revolutionary change from Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American poet to publish her works, to Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Walter Mosley, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall, the contemporary top Black writers.

Slave narratives are the beginning of African American literature. The slaves, who suffered the oppression of White racism, undertook writing their memories and expressing their own feelings of the racial oppression for the first time. Slave narratives can be broadly categorized into three distinct forms: tales of religious redemption, tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle, and tales of progress. The tales written to inspire the abolitionist struggle are the most famous because they tend to have a strong autobiographical motif. Many of them are now recognized as the masterpiece. One among them is the well known autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs

The next leading voice was Sojourner Truth. As an antislavery legend she was the leading exponent of liberty in both the abolitionist and feminist movements in the mid-nineteenth century. Maria Stewart has been the America's first black woman political writer. Her production of *Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*, a collection of speeches and essays on such topics as slavery, women's rights and African American uplift, opened the door for others.

Lucy Terry, is the author of "Bars Fight", the oldest poem of African American Literature. "Bars Fight" is a piece of poem about two White families attacked by Native Americans. Frances Harper in her writings argues quite pointedly for the education and higher training of women that would allow them to be their own self. Hopkins links capitalism, sexism and racism as the motivating factors behind the rape of the black women, the destruction of black business, and the lynching of black men. The literature between 1891 and 1920 mainly focused to a greater or lesser degree on religious behaviors, spiritualism and moral values.

The twentieth century has been an epoch making era for the African American literary tradition because of the significant contributions made by African American women writers during this century. African-American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and many others have rewritten the existing literary traditions by expressing themselves and creating a deep impact on the African-American, literary arena. These writers write not only about themselves, but also took the great task in unveiling the problems about African- American women.

Commenting on African American women writers, Mary Helen Washington writes:

When I think of how essentially alone black women have been—alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control; alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realize that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life. Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers, there are more models of how it is possible for us to live, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us. (ix-xxii)

The twentieth century has been a period of intense literary activity for African American women writers. It was a time when for the first time these talented writers started to write and express their creative genius.

African American women writers have a unique but depressing and gloomy past. Their ancestors were uprooted from the continent of Africa and brought in America as slaves. African men and women were tortured, brutalized, oppressed and exploited beyond imagination. Arriving in America, these African men, women and children were systematically and legally robbed of their humanity (Baker 2). However the system of slavery proved even more brutal for African women. They became the victims and faced violence at the hands of their white masters not only in the form of hard labor and whipping lashes but also became an unwanted victim of sexual abuse. These women were often raped by their white masters and their children sold away by them. Thus they were robbed of their respect, dignity and identity. Harihar Kulkarni writes in this context:

The brutal treatment that the black women received during slavery invariably left profound scars on their psyche. Their physical bondage ultimately turned into a psychological bondage causing mutation and mutilations of their world. The external forces operating at the socio-economic levels came to bear an unmistakable relationship to the internal fears, worries, anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and frustration. The poisonous fangs of slavery manifested themselves in innumerable ways and finally determined the behavioral pattern of black women. (59)

African American women have been taking care of their children, their family and have actively played a role forming an integral part of the African American social milieu, but she is the most ignored class. She has always been denied of civilized life. Thus, they are economically

downtrodden and in the most vulnerable position, and live the life of invisible citizens in America.

The twentieth century heralded a new age, not only for African American women's literature but for American literature as well. It was a period which saw African American women writers being liberated from their past and writing with a new self-awakening. They finally started writing and defining themselves rather than being defined by others. They broke the boundaries of racism, sexism and class set by white patriarchal society. While discussing the Twentieth Century African American women literature, Barbara Christian writes:

One of course, might say that any literature, at core, is concerned with the definition and discovery of self in relation to the society in which one lives. But for Afro-American women, this natural desire has been powerfully opposed, repressed, distorted by this society's restriction. For in defining ourselves, Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism, and class that characterize our existence.... Yet the struggle is not won. Our vision is still seen, even by many progressive, as secondary, our words trivialized as minority issues or women's complaints, our stance sometimes characterized by others as divisive. But there is a deep philosophical reordering that is occurring in this literature that is already having its effect on so many of us whose lives and expressions are an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle. (159-163)

The literature in the early few decades of the twentieth century was characterized by cultural phenomena called Harlem Renaissance. Major women writers of the Harlem period were Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Marita Bonner, Angelina Weld Grimke, Ann Spencer and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Notably major women writers were novelists. These novelists such as Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston tried to break stereotype images of black women prevailing in mainstream white American society.

Harlem inspired Ann Petry creates her fiction featuring ordinary, law-abiding, working-class African-American protagonists: most start off devoted to hard work and driven by middle-class aspirations, with a strong belief in the American Dream. But as they are thwarted at every turn by individual and institutional racism and, in the women's cases, by violent sexism, they end up resigned, filled with despair, and often engaged in destructive, sometimes violent, acts. She wrote *The Country Place* (1945) and *The Street* (1945). *The Street* is a story about a black woman's existence in ghetto like conditions in Harlem. Petry questions the slave like conditions for an urban woman who is still not free and depicts the shallowness of urban life and growing despondency in African American people.

Paule Marshall is one of the most important writers of this period. She wrote her influential novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Her works are like her own manifesto. She portrays characters having different facets yet they are always rooted in their culture and society. Her works deals with gender as well as racial oppression. The characters she creates are phenomenal and have complex psyche. She fathoms a wide array of themes like motherhood, sisterhood, marriage, mother daughter relationship and deeply inspects how they affect women. The decades of 1960s and 1970s are another important phase in twentieth century African American women's writing. It was characterized by the rhetoric that —**Black is Beautiful** but

most importantly black women writers started to write with a new fervor exploring issues like family violence, poverty, abuse, racism, sexism and coercion. This phase witnessed the emergence of writers such as Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Margaret Walker, Sherley Ann Williams, Mari Evans and a host of other talented writers.

By the mid-seventies, African American women fiction writers, like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayle Jones had not only defined their cultural context as a distinctly Afro-American one, but they had also probed many facets of the interrelationship of sexism and racism in their society. Not only had they demonstrated the fact that sexism existed in black communities, but they had also challenged the prevailing definition of woman in American society, especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality. And they had insisted not only on the centrality of Black women to Afro-American history, but also on their pivotal significance to present-day social and Political developments in America. The novels of the late seventies and the eighties continue to explore these themes - that sexism must be struggled against in black communities and that sexism is integrally connected to racism. The fiction of this period - Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978) and *Tar Baby* (1980), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Alice Walker's *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) and *The Color Purple* (1982), Joyce Carol Thomas's *Marked by Fire* (1982), Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982), and Paule Marshall's *Praisesona for the Widow* (1983)- look at ways in which the quality of Black women's lives is affected by the interrelationship of sexism and racism. They pose the question concerning to what community Black woman must belong in order to understand themselves most effectively in their totality as blacks and women. Toni Morrison was a powerful and imaginative editor at Random House when the movement began, and played a key role in the uplift of her community. Morrison gives her characters physical and psychological qualities which enhance their chances for survival and fulfillment, thus leading to the survival of the black community. Through her characters in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison portrays the black community with reference to blackness and the inner struggles of the individual as well as the class differences and social structures within the collective. Publishing such formidable figures as Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones and Angela Davis, she inspired a younger generation of writers especially Gloria Naylor. The lack of love and the perversion of love which many of the characters in *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Love* suffer from are for the most part connected to the relationships between parents and children. She also stresses on the damaging personalities of women due to sexual behavior of males.

Alice Walker, like Toni Morrison has used her writing as a platform to champion the causes of all women. She is well noted for her prolific writings that proclaim the struggles of African American women. She is also a constant critic of established forms of feminism and later established "Womanism", a form of feminism that incorporates specific qualities common to the experiences of African American women. Alice Walker spent time working to fight for equality during the Civil Rights Movement. Like her short stories, Walker's six novels place more emphasis on the inner workings of African American life than on the relationships between blacks and whites. Her first book, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), details the sorrow and redemption of a rural black family trapped in a multigenerational cycle of violence and economic dependency. *The Color Purple* (1982) expresses an undertone of the Civil Rights

perspective. The story of Celie, the major character, begins in despair and frustration but ends positively as she becomes aware of her humanity as a totality of her self-expression and self-realization. The novel echoes the relevance of the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings as crucial to developing a sense of self.

Toni Cade Bambara is one of the best African American short story writers. Her works are an interfusion of radical politics, feminism and African American culture. Her very first book, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) established her as an outstanding writer.

Gloria Naylor is another important writer of this decade. She created stories depicting African American women's struggles and resilience. She beautifully delineates heroism in a common man and woman's life. The talent of Naylor lies in the fact that she gives her readers vivid and realistic experience of what she has been thinking in her mind. Her very first novel *The Women of Brewster Place: a Novel in Seven Stories* (1982) proved her extraordinary talent which won her critical acclaim and also American Book Award in 1983. Gloria Naylor weaves together the stories of seven women living in Brewster Place, a bleak inner-city sanctuary, creating a powerful, moving portrait of the strengths, struggles, and hopes of black women in America. Vulnerable and resilient, openhanded and open-hearted, these women forge their lives in a place that in turn threatens and protects—a common prison and a shared home. Naylor renders both loving and painful human experiences with simple eloquence and uncommon intuition. Her remarkable sense of community and history makes *The Women of Brewster Place* a contemporary classic.

Black feminist critics, such as Mary Helen Washington in her introduction to *Black Eyed Susans* and Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists*, applaud the realistic images by black women writers such as Morrison, Walker, Meriwether, Marshall, and Bambara. As illustrated in their fiction, interviews in *Black Women Writers at Work*, and the pioneer essays on black feminist criticism by Barbara Smith and Deborah E. McDowell, many black women novelists deploy to a greater or lesser degree the following signs and structures: (1) motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journey from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; (4) centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) shared focus on personal relationships in the family and community; (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions; (7) iconography of women's clothing; and (8) black female language.

African American women writers are acting like a mouthpiece for the existing black women in America. They have tried to declare the true reality and also created the truth in their own way, which defies existing perceptions. Instead of writing for a larger audience, they have written for themselves and all other African American women.

From the beginning to the contemporary period, African-American women's contribution is shaped by their experience both as blacks and as women, an experience whose pressure they have resisted at the same time they have recognized its strategic survival value in life and exploited its symbolic power in their art.

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