

## AN INSIGHT INTO THE MARGINALIZED BLACK TRADITION AND LITERATURE

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### Abstract

Globalisation has put forth many new concepts and theories advocating a flexible attitude in society, about society and for the society. Marginalised society advocated a mass appeal for the downtrodden and they started coming ahead and speak. Afro- American and their literary aura stands unique in itself as it do place them at par with the Whites. It became imperative for them to show their literary output just to zip away the outbursts of people like Hume, Kant , Jefferson and Hegel. The paper will relate the history of the Afro-Americans in varied fields and the way they acquired a strong position , attracted even the Whites and made them love their writings, music, traditions and talent. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. advocated a balanced approach, thereby , promoting a cult in a mixed form .. of blacks and whites so that both could draw the best from one another. The work of Hayford ‘Ethiopia Unbound’ showed the strong place that the Afro-American can acquire. Harlem Renaissance came as a sharper ray of light for the Blacks and slowly and slowly, they attained a place that grew widened and prospered. The situation is such as of now that the Blacks enjoys each and every right and are gaining power in every quarter of the world and stream.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said:

*My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without.*

*(The Signifying Monkey,xix)*

Afro-American literary tradition came in vogue, to show that persons of African descent can also create literature. Marginalisation got the forefront and Afro-Americans uttered their unsaid aspirations, holding up their unique identity and propagating to the whole world. The African residing in Europe felt forced to create a literature to show clearly that blacks do indeed possess the intellectual ability to create literature and to attack the social and economic institutions. Thereby, delimiting the humanity of black people in western cultures. The Blacks badly felt the need to show to the world that they can write too, the kind of literature in competence to the whites. Hume, Kant, Jefferson and Hegel opined that the absence or presence of a written literature was the litmus test of the potential talent and humanity of a race. So, Afro-American literature came to the forefront, literature produced in the United States by writers of African origin. Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan says that 'African- American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community of vast wealth and economic power.' (*English Postcoloniality*, p135).

The author of the oldest known piece of Afro-American literature is Lucy Terry. She is famous for her ballad *Bars Fight* that is about an attack upon two white families by Native American on Aug. 25, 1746. Lucy was stolen from Africa and sold into slavery as an infant. Phillis Wheatley (1753-84) was not only the first Afro-American to publish a book (*Poems on Various Subjects*, 1773) but also the first to achieve an international renown as a writer. She was born in Senegal, captured and sold into slavery at a tender age of seven. George Washington praised and thanked her for a poem written in his honor. Jupiter Hammon published his poem 'An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries' and became famous as the first published Black writer in America. Victor Sejour published his short story work *The Mulatto* (1837). William Wells Brown wrote *The President's Daughter* (1853), based on the rumour that President Thomas Jefferson has fathered a daughter with his slave Sally Hemings. Harriet Wilson's 'Our Nig' talked about the difficulties of northern free Blacks. The storm created by the slave narrative 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe was unique. It became the second best-selling book in the world. Stowe's work was an angry retort to the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. Subsequently, anti-Tom novels came out in response, examples include, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1852) by Mary Henderson Eastman and *The Sword and the Distance* (1853) by William Gilmore Simms. Harriet Jacobson (1813-1897) was the first woman to author a slave narrative in the United States. Her narrative 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl', written under the name 'Linda Brent' portrayed her struggle for freedom, for herself and her two children. The injustices that the black woman suffered and slavery finds mentioned in an appropriate manner and in an autobiographical vein.

William Lloyd Garrison talks about Frederick Douglass in Preface of Douglass's autobiographical work 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave':

*Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own narrative, in his own style and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else...I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements, that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to slavery as it is...*

(Douglass, Preface xiv, L-6-12)

William L. Andrews argues that the spiritual narratives: “gave the twin themes of the Afro-American pregeneric myth- knowledge and freedom- their earliest narrative form.”

(Andrews,p1)

Writers of spiritual narratives includes James Gronnisaw, John Marrant, women writers- Zilpha Elaw with her work ‘*Memoirs of the life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travel and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw*’(1846); Maria W. Steward’s ‘*Meditations from the pen of Mrs. Maria W. Steward*’ and ‘*Religious and the Pure Principles of Morality and Meditations*’; Jarena Lee’s ‘*The Life and Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*’; Nancy Prince’s ‘*Narrative of the life and Travels of Mrs. Namcy Prince*’(1850); Sojourner Truth, an advocate of abolitionist and feminist movement, worked with Oliver Gilbert, a white woman, to write the ‘*Narrative of Sojourner Truth*’, a work contributed to both the slave narrative and female spiritual narratives.

Even Henry Louis Gates, Jr. propagated a cult mixed in black and white. He doesn’t advocate a separatist black canon. Gates says:

Every black American text must confess to complex ancestry, one high and low,(that is, literary and vernacular) but also one white and black... there can be no doubt that white texts inform and influence black texts(and vice-versa),so that a thoroughly integrated canon of American literature is not only politically sound, it is intellectually sound as well.

(*Contemporary Black Biography*, Vol.67)

The Post-slavery era found a prominent writer in the name of W.E.B. Du Bois, published a highly influential collection of essays entitled “*The Souls of Black Folk*”. As early as 1921, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in the *Crisis*:

*Negro art is today plowing a difficult row. We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us...merely human.*

(*Crisis*, p55-56)

Du Bois also said in his work “*The Soul of Black Folk*”:

*The problem of twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.(p10)*

In contrast to Du Bois, Booker T. Washington believed that Blacks should first lift themselves up and prove themselves the equal of whites before asking for an end to racism. Washington’s published works includes ‘*Up From Slavery*’(1901), ‘*The Future of the American Negro*’(1899), *Tuskegee and its People*(1905) and ‘*My Larger Education*’(1911).

Ekra-Agiman writing under the name of Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, published the powerful book, ‘*Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* in 1911. He became one of the main thinkers of his generation. Molefi Asante introduces, ‘*Ethiopia Unbound*’ and says:

*This book is extraordinary in its optimism. One could approach the book as a novel, a philosophical treatise, a dialogue of rationalism, an Edwardian Romance or as a meditation on love of self, family and community. It is all of these and more because it is filled with Greek myths as reference and is a sound political tract on the contemporary strivings of the Turks and Russians as well as British colonial life. Yet Hayford is certain in the end that there would be victory over the colonial oppression in the Gold coast and that his people, the Fante,*

*would enjoy their own freedoms and independence as citizens equal to any in the world.*

(Asante, M.K. *New Introduction by M.K.Asante*)

Despite Hayford's rich knowledge of pre-colonial history and culture, his story and the protagonist move towards an ahistorical and dematerialized vision of Africa as a spiritual type. Kwamankra observes:

*I am writing this on the verandah of a house in the main street of Kumansi. Where once stood the palace of the king, now stands an ugly coast building with dirty blinds and a dirtier shop below. But the men and women are not changed. The type is pronounced and as I watch them passing up and down in different groups, it is easy to see that the men and women, who walked the bank of the Nile in days of yore, are not far different from the remnants of the sons of Efua Kobi.*

(Hayford, J.E.Casely. *Ethiopia Unbound*, p185)

*Ethiopia Unbound*, was concerned to settle the matter of black mental equality, which had remained something of an open question for two hundred years. Jamaican Marcus Garvey deserves praise for he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA). He favoured black nationalism and always wanted the African people to look proud upon their ancestral homeland. Frances E.W. Harper (1825-1911) wrote 'Eliza Harris', a response to H.B. Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', that bought him huge national recognition.

**Harlem Renaissance** was a phase of a larger New Negro movement emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a flowering of African-American literature and art in the community of Harlem in New York. It was the best of the age wherein numerous black artists, musicians and others produced classic works in fields from jazz to theatre. The social foundations of this movement included the Great Migration of African American from rural to urban areas, from South to North. This accelerated the level of literacy, opening up of socioeconomic opportunities and developing race pride. Magazines drew important for the movement, such as, *The Crisis*, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Opportunity* published by the National Urban League and *The Messenger*. Harlem Renaissance saw the growth of Harlem Stride Style, a new way of playing the piano. It helped in narrowing the gaps between the poor Negroes and elite Negro. Jazz was thought of as a symbol of the south but forthwith the wealthy blacks became more accessible to jazz music. Jazz musicians included Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton and Willie 'The Lion' Smith. The Negro started to merge with whites into the classical world of musical compositions. Whites got attracted to the blacks's songs, blues, spiritual and jazz. Roland Hayes was the first Negro to gain fame both nationally and internationally. The Renaissance grew more with the patronage of white Americans, such as, Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason who helped the blacks to publish their work which otherwise was closed for the black American community. Authors who became nationally known were Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Eric D. Walrons and Langston Hughes.

Langston Hughes's the most famous Harlem Renaissance poet's works includes 'The Book of American Poetry', 'The Weary Blues', and a novel named 'Not Without Laughter'. His most famous poem is 'The Negro speaks of Rivers'. He says:

*I've known rivers,  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human  
veins,  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers...  
I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers,  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

(Hughes, Langston. *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*)

Zora Neale Hurston too, acquired fame with her classic novel ‘*Their Eyes were watching God*’(1937). Harlem Renaissance paved the way for the American Civil Rights Movement. The Great Migration during the Second World War made the black people settle in northern cities like Chicago. Writers became active to end segregation and racism. James Baldwin with his famous novel ‘*Go Tell It On The Mountain*’ projected his personal story of being both Black and a homosexual. His friend added more to the cult of the black tradition. Richard Wright with his best known novel ‘*Native Son*’(1940), which tells about the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black, struggling for acceptance in Chicago. Ralph Ellison who won National Book Award in 1953 for his work ‘*The Invisible Man*’, gathered fame too. Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for her book of poetry ‘*Annie Allen*’(1949).

Afro- American literature reached the mainstream in the starting of 1970s as books by Black writers consistently achieved best-selling status and awards. James Emanuel bought his collection of black writings named ‘*Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*(1968), Toni Morrison came with her novels ‘*The Bluest Eye*’(1970), ‘*Beloved*’ and ‘*Song of Solomon*’. She is the first Afro-American to win the Nobel Prize in literature. Alice Walker won fame with her epistolary novel ‘*The Color Purple*’. Once she said to an interviewer:

*I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my  
people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions,  
the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women...For me,  
black women are the most fascinating creations in the world.*

(Walker, Alice.250-251)

Young Afro –American novelists include David Anthony Durham, Tayari Jones, Kalisha Buckhanon, Mat Johnson, 22 Packer and Colson Whitehead. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. stands special in his activity for the Afro-American cult. He was born in Keyser, West Virginia to Pauline Auguste Coleman and Henry Louis Gates, Sr. He is an author, filmmaker, essayist, literary critic and a Professor. He is the first Afro-American to receive the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship. He serves as the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University where he is a director of the W.E.B.Du Bois Institute for African and Afro-American Research. His major scholarly work is *The Signifying Monkey*(1989).Gates says in *Critical Inquiry*:

*Tales of the Signifying Monkey had their origins in slavery; hundreds of  
these tales have been recorded since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In black music,  
Jazz Gillum, Count Basie, Oscar Brown, Jr.Little Willie Dixon, Nat King  
Cole, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett and Johnny Otis—have recorded*

songs called either “The Signifying Monkey” or simply ‘signifying’. (Vol.9,685)

*The Signifying Monkey* is a character of Afro-American folklore, a trickster figure of Yoruba mythology Esu Elegbara. Yoruba religion shows religious and spiritual concepts of Yoruba people whose hometown is in Southwestern Nigeria, parts of Benin and Togo, came to known as Yorubaland. The story shows the signifying monkey insulting the lion and claiming that he is only repeating the Elephant’s words. The lion then confronts the Elephant, who beats the lion. The lion later comes to realize that the monkey has been signifying and has insulted him and returns angrily.

Bernard W. Bell defines signifi(g) as “*an elaborate, indirect form of goading or insult generally making use of profanity.*” ( Afro-American novel,22). Gates opines that the black vernacular tradition celebrates the use of tropes or figurative language. He believes that ‘signifying’ belongs to the common man and to the black community. He applies his discussion of ‘signifying’ to the Afro-American literary tradition in the third chapter and says:

*The blackness of black literature is that on absolute or a metaphysical condition...nor is it some transcending essence that exists outside if its manifestations in texts. The ‘blackness’ of black American literature can be discerned only through close readings. By ‘blackness’, here I mean specific uses of literary language, that are shared, repeated, critiqued and revised.*

(*The Signifying Monkey*,121)

‘Signifying’ is a homonym with the idea put forth by Saussure wherein the signifier (sound image) interacts with the signified (concept) forming a linguistic sign. Gates puts off this homonym and uses the linguistic concept of signifier and signified with the vernacular concept of signifying. Gates has been a true propagandist of the Afro-American culture and tradition. He got struck in a controversy with his Cambridge arrest. The arrest attracted national attention after U.S. President Barack Obama declared that the police acted stupidly in arresting Gates. He invited Gates to share a beer with him at the White House.

Afro-American tradition prospered and is prospering now too on the hard core pretext that the blacks can write written literature also. The globalization of the world has made to believe that no demarcation should be done with respect to **color, class and creed**.

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