

Essay on African-American Fiction

African American literature is 'the body of literature written by Americans of African descent.' African American literature began in the latter half of the 18th century with some of the members of this community expressed their ideas and feelings in literary form. The history of African American literature can even be looked at as the history of African American people in America as it gave a faithful depiction of the many ups and downs in the personal, social, cultural and political lives of these people. Though it was only after 1970s that this literature was widely acclaimed for its richness, it was there for more than two centuries, attempting to come on the surface of American mainstream literature.

History of African Americans in America shows that they were enslaved since their arrival in America. These slaves were regarded as subhuman and incapable of mastering the arts and sciences. It is shocking to the civilized readers like us to read the words of great philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Hume who considered 'negroes . . . to be naturally inferior to the whites' with no 'ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences'. Naturally the aim of the African American writers was first to prove their skills in writing their works following the norms of White literature. They were sure that unless until they demonstrated their mastery of the norms of the White literature, the Whites will not consider Blacks to be human and equal to them. That is why, the writers of the first generation toiled to master the literary skills of the Whites. Actually, it was not an easy task for them as they were not even considered to be the full and equal members of society. Naturally, it was a Herculean task for the African American writers to get recognized as writers in the American society. It can be seen from the ordeal Phillis Wheatley, the first African American poet, had to undergo to be recognized as a poet. She was forced to approach to the court of law to prove that she was the author of her poems collected in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Even though the court verified her authorship, it did not help her much. Finally, she had to get her poems published in London. In these poems, Wheatley has exhibited remarkable mastery of the various poetic forms practiced by the mainstream American writers.

As the socio-political conditions of the time were unfavourable for the existence of the Black people, they had to fight for every single necessity of their life. Their lives were full of sufferings and atrocities. Naturally, these writers expressed their personal emotions along with the agonies of their community. Their attempts were directed to establish their self-identity as an individual as well as the identity of the African American community. With the hard efforts of these writers, they succeeded in demonstrating their intellectual capabilities.

Though the declaration of American independence brought equality to all, African Americans were not treated as such by the racist Whites. It led to the Civil War and the authorities were forced to announce the abolition of slavery. Yet, the mindset of the Whites did not change much and there was not improvement in social and economic conditions of the African Americans. Though African Americans had continued to contribute much to the progress of the United States, in return they could only get disappointment, discrimination, and danger. Yet the African Americans bravely continued their battle against the injustice of their life and emerged victorious, forcing their enemy to accept them on equal terms.

Even though African Americans did not get equal opportunities and were discriminated in every walk of life, they continued to march towards excellence with their hard labour. Their achievement in the field of literature is one of the most remarkable aspects of the post-Civil War period. African American writers like Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, and others tried their hands at almost every literary genre; principal amongst them were poetry and autobiographies.

The early 19th century African American literature emphasized the urgent need of abolition of slavery. The writers of this period focused upon the inhuman conditions in the lives of Black people and tried to attract the attention of the world towards the problem of slavery in America. To fulfill

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their purpose these writers tried their hands at the writing of essays, poetry, fiction, and journalism. For example, through his Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, David Walker made it very clear that if the inhuman system of slavery is not abolished, there was the danger of racial violence in the country. David Walker was immediately followed by like-minded writers and activists like Maria W. Stewart, Jarena Lee and others.

Towards the end of the first half of the 19th century, there started the tradition of writing slave narratives. This movement had got impetus from the antislavery movement of the South. The slave narratives dominated the literary output of the country in terms of both quality and enormous interest of the native as well as foreign readers. Frederick Douglass became the well-known figure after the publication of his Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself. In this life-story, Douglass narrated his efforts to get education and buy his freedom. This work portrayed him as a self-made man. Douglass was soon followed by Harriet Jacobs who wrote her life-story, entitled Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. In her autobiography, Harriet depicted the incidents from the life of African American slave woman who was sexually exploited by her master.

After the end of the Civil War, though Blacks were declared equal, in reality, there were many complex issues that needed urgent attention. Though there were large scale efforts establish a stronger and better country, the African Americans faced many impediments in their path of progress. The passing of the Reconstruction Act in 1867 was an effort to protect freed slaves from the racist Whites. The law also helped to establish many schools for the African Americans. Even some legal measures were taken to make slavery illegal. However, there were certain loopholes to the law which allowed the states to pass their own laws regarding slavery. It worsened the condition of the Negroes. It gave rise to the violence and many Negroes were lynched in the South. Though the conditions of the Negroes had worsened, many of them continued writing and get it published in magazines and newspapers. The literature of this period was marked by stories in which the writers spoke about their difficulties in publishing their works. During this period there came to existence the National Baptist Publishing Company, a Black enterprise that published songs, poems, fiction, and autobiographies of many Black writers.

With the arrival of the 20th century, there came Harlem Renaissance. It celebrated blackness of the skin as well as blackness of the art. Many African American literary and artistic forms were imitated. The Black literature could not keep itself detached from the politics. Richard Wright's Native Son set the tone of this period. This work changed American culture and African American writing. Richard Wright was effectively followed by the writers like William Attaway and Chester Himes.

The study of Black writing of this period shows that it was proletarian in nature and attempted to raise social consciousness. It was the period of Great Depression and many writers had started writing on nonracial subjects. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Seraph on the Suwanee was called as 'non-Negro' novel because it tells the story of White characters. In his Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison is seen influenced not only by the Black writers but equally so by the White writers for which he was harshly criticized by other African American writers.

By the close of the 20th century, African American fiction immensely represented the Black culture. It had become a force in itself. Toni Morrison had won Nobel Prize for literature. Other outstanding African American authors include Charles Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, and Alice Walker. Through their works, these writers acknowledged the multiplicity of African American identities and renewed interest in history. As writers, they successfully imagined the psychological and spiritual lives of African Americans during slavery and segregation.