



Coping with Slavery and Racism in Post Slavery Era: A Theoretical and Historical Perspective of Black American Literature

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Abstract

Scholars of English literature from various universities have reviewed African, American, Indian, and Canadian literature. These texts are reviewed for unambiguous and clear knowledge and understanding of thoughts and themes of the authors. They have their perspectives on the society, history, and political background of that period. This article will focus on Black American literature and the problem caused by racism over the years.

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Racism has brought a new form of artistic expression in America, such as “African American Literature” or “Black American Literature”. Redeeming the face of culture of black people from the negative to positive path is the major concern of this literature’s sub-genre. The study reassesses the emergence of Black American Literature from the authors in 18th century like Olaudah Equiano and Phyllis Wheatley to writers in post-slavery era like Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The paper reveals a grim reality of blacks through “The Sport of the Gods” by Dunbar, where blacks were the sport for the gods (whites). This novel is based on a Black American, Berry Hamilton who shares his life experiences and story of other blacks with the readers especially when they came across their slave masters.

Keywords: *Racism, Slavery, post-slavery era, Black American Literature, African American literature, English literature*

1. Introduction

The tradition of African-American literature refers to the tradition and culture of suppressed people. The literary writings of African-American tradition feature those oppressed and suppressed people. The authors discuss the pathos and plights of people with their creative and artistic expressions through poems, plays, stories and fictions. The creations are recognized well in the global intellectual scenario. Those writers are socio-creative by nature. Those arts emanated from the combined social situation where Afro-American discovered himself. It has



direct relation with the economical, historical, social, and educational growth of people and it also holds a different position in global literature.

The black writers bring socio-creative art into existence where they sit down and ponder their grave realities. Their critical analysis and deep thoughts on tragic situations result in their artistic expressions. Their art and their lives are closely related. Every black writer comes from the black community. These writers express the needs and lives of their community while addressing their audience. Their community is the frame of reference they relate to. Their peculiar nature makes them what they are (Sahoo).

1.1 Background

African American Literature or Black American literature refers to the entirety of literature published in the US by American African writers. This genre can be traced back to the works of writers in the late 18th century, including the likes of Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley. It reaches its peak with the “Harlem Renaissance” and slave narratives and keeps up with the works of writers like “Maya Angelou”, “Toni Morrison” and “Walter Moseley” who are well-acclaimed in the US. Also known as “New Negro Movement”, the “Harlem Renaissance” is an era of great creativity and literary vigour that happened in 1920s, where literary trend was completely transformed by Black Americans from quaint works of dialects and traditional simulations of white authors to urbane explorations of black culture and life which simulated and revealed racial pride and new confidence (Britannica).

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In New York City, Harlem's black ghetto was the core of this campaign which motivated the black wannabe writers, artists, and musicians who teamed up to encourage each other and share their experiences. Their roles in vast American society, slavery, racism, equality, African-American culture is some of the issues and themes. Other literary forms like sermons, spirituals, blues, rap, and gospel music are other issues in this genre. Their change of attitude over the past centuries have led to equal effects on the emphases of Black American works. The slave narratives are basically focused on slavery before the American Civil War.

At the beginning of the 20th century, it was redefined by the books of Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright who focused on the racial issues and “Black Nationalism”. African American literature has been well approved as an important aspect of American literature with books like “*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker”, “*Roots: The Saga of an American Family*” by Alex Haley, and “*Beloved* by Toni Morrison” that bagged both award-winning and best-selling titles (Wikipedia). African American literature has been based mostly on themes focused on Blacks in the US, including the roles of Afro-Americans in the vast American society and what makes them American. The status of black Americans in terms of freedom in the American nation, equality which was missing in black community in the US, and the themes of black American culture, racism, religion, nostalgia, and slavery, are some of the major traits of



American literature. The Black American literature is both influenced by African diasporic writings on several nations and the heritage of the great African diaspora (Ogene).

2. Literature Reviews

A lot of African-Americans were hoping for equal opportunities for attaining education with a landmark case “Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)” which outlawed state legislations building different schools for white and black students (**Caldwell and Obasi**). Whether the first Black students were getting proper education opportunities in integrated schools is a matter of debate. The National Guard used to bring these students to school to protect from protesting White adults and they were also not allowed to participate with white students in activities. For example, the first Afro-American who attended a Louisiana-based White school, **Ruby Bridges** came across people yelling at her in school each day, holding up signs like “Integration is a mortal sin” and “we want to keep our school White” and making threats to her.

According to Herrnstein & Murray, intelligence is inherent and that both genetics and genes play a vital role in residential discrimination in terms of intelligence. There was a belief that White people are more intelligent to Black ones which stereotyped Black students drastically (**James; Diamond**). Due to these stereotypes, teachers didn’t have much expectations for Black students (**Tenenbaum & Ruck; Mathew**). They have perceptions that especially male African-Americans are more impulsive, hyper, aggressive, and immature (Ford and Whiting). They make wrong referrals to special education because of confounding cultural changes for behavioural and cognitive issues (**Neal et al.**).

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Those teachers also reported that Black boys have limited interpersonal skills and more behavioural issues than Black girls and White boys (**Mathews et al**). Due to this reason, Black boys are overrepresented in special education and lower track classes (**Diamond**), understated in higher classes (**Henfield et al**) and have more odds to get suspensions and detentions (**Mattison and Aber**). The consequences of poor education of Afro-American males had a drastic impact on their communities and families as a lot of high-paying jobs call for some special training or diploma.

If 40% of those males were school drop-outs, there are high chances that they will have a tough time and live in poverty with their families. The unemployment rate was around 17.5% for African-American males above 20 years in comparison to 7.9% for Caucasians and 27.4% of overall Blacks were poor in comparison to 9.9% Caucasians (**US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2011; Bureau of Census, 2010**). Stereotypes of employers are the factor which affect employment growth of African Americans which often cause covert racism in recruitment (**Cornelius**).

According to **Bertand and Mullainathan**, changing European names to names sounding African-American in similar resumes resulted in getting 50% more callbacks for European



names from employers (**Blackmon and Thomas**). Hence, stereotypes have had a huge impact on African-Americans in getting jobs. According to **Semple**, there are several traits of African-American men like expressiveness, assertiveness, and verbal directness, which conflict with the work environment which was designed predominantly for Whites. These traits are stereotypes that are developed by the society that build discrimination like disproportionate job rates and salaries among Black men (**Cornelius**). Black professional men are twice likely to be jobless and earn 20% less as compared to their White counterparts (Cornelius; Current Population Survey, 2008). Only 22% of Black men were employed in professional/management positions in comparison to 33% White males (**US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007**).

2.1 Research Gap

This study takes the above-mentioned stereotypes further by focusing on the root cause of slavery and racism which is mentioned in Black American Literature by many authors in the past. This study fills this gap and gives a clear picture on post-slavery era and how those social evils affected the lives of blacks.

2.2 Research Question

- How Black American literature emerged in post-slavery era?
- How racism and slavery affected the lives of blacks?

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2.3 Research Objectives

- To determine the emergence of Black American literature in post-slavery era
- To reveal the grim reality of blacks due to racism and slavery

3. Research Methodology

Considering the above objectives and research questions, this study is completely based on secondary data collected from various texts on Black American literature written over the years to reassess the stark reality of blacks in post-slavery era.

4. Analysis of Study

After the end of American civil war and slavery, a lot of Black authors have emerged to write commendable works related to the grim reality of Blacks in the US. Some of the notable works are “*The Souls of Black Folk*” by Du Bois. However, another famous author “Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)” had different opinion by publishing “*The Future of the American Negro* (1899)”, “*Up from Slavery* (1901)”, “*My Larger Education* (1911)”, and “*Tuskegee and its People* (1905)”.



4.1. How Black American literature emerged in post-slavery era?

Lucy Terry was well regarded as the writer of the oldest Black literature by writing “*Bars Fight* (1746)”. Her poem was unpublished till 1885’s “*History of Western Massachusetts*” by Josiah Holland (Adams). Another poem titled “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries” was published by Jupiter Hammon in 1761. Then the “*Poems on Various Subjects*” was published by Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) in 1773, while America got freedom in 1776. She was also abducted and sold as a slave when she was only 7 years old and she was born in Senegal, Africa. A Boston-based merchant bought her and brought her to America. She wrote well-acclaimed poetry with her mastery in English literature and she was well-acclaimed as one of the top authors in “African Revolution”, along with the personalities like George Washington, who was known to “personally thanked her for a poem she wrote in his honour” (Gates).

Authors like “Victor Sejour (1817-1874)” and “William Wells Brown (1814-1884)” are known to have produced previous fiction written by Black authors. Sejour was based in New Orleans but, when he turned 19, moved to France. He published “*Le Mulatre (The Mulatto)*”, a short fiction in 1837. The story is well regarded to tribute the first work by a Black author but it was written and published in French. Meanwhile, Brown was a well-known lecturer, historian, playwright, novelist, and abolitionist. He was born in the southern US into slavery and ran away to the North where he was a great writer and worked for abolitionist origins.

He wrote “*The President’s Daughter* (1853)” or “*Clotel*”, the first novel by a Black author. It is based on what was known as a rumor at that time on how Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, his slave, gave birth to a daughter. However, the book was published in England and was not known as the first published African novel in the US. However, the novel “*Our Nig* (1859)” made Harriet Wilson highly acclaimed as it discusses the problems of “Northern-free Blacks”.

A lot of African American writers came forward after the American Civil war and end of slavery era by writing non-fiction works on the misery of Blacks in the nation. Some of the notable works were “*The Souls of Black Folk*” by DU Bois, “*Up from Slavery* (1901)” by Washington, along with the likes of “*The Future of the American Negro* (1899)”, “*My Larger Education* (1911)”, and “*Tuskegee and its People* (1905)”.

4.2. How racism and slavery affected the lives of blacks?

Stereotypes on Blacks in the US are the byproducts of slavery. These beliefs are rooted deeply into the people from White racist groups operationalized with discriminating and oppressive actions which defined how slaves should behave and perceive. A lot of White buyers of the slaves created stereotypes to justify their political, social, and economic agendas (Feagin & Feagin). Being an owner of the slaves was like a status symbol in the past among White supremacies who used to enjoy being violent and quell resistance from the slaves with brutal



treatments. This action relegated, dehumanized slaves and their roles, and dominated their activities to those who deemed just vital to the owners. The social restrictions determined behavioral activity, familial and individual relationships portrayed by the slaves. For example, slaves had to fulfill the expectations of slave owners and they were removed from their cultural beliefs. Government and state support upheld the dehumanising and brutal treatments and it was politicised to be important to control White people to make it a commonplace (Hadden).

The strong stereotypes of slave owners determined how to treat African Americans. They were always treated collectively not as people. The policies and laws were based on racist foundation and held social perceptions of Blacks. The standards to treat Blacks has always been the same even after the end of slavery period. When the population of slaves outnumbered Whites, there were political pressures to force the Blacks to “keep Whites safe” from resistance by the slaves against the idealized Whites’ expectations. The patrols of political forces were enforced to put on the “superiority-inferiority complex” which is held for African Americans today.

Slaves were controlled by and the property of slave patrols to maintain socioeconomic stability for slave owners. The initial formal arrangement, slave patrol entailed to maintain the supremacy of Whites over Blacks (Turner et al.). The patrol was at the authority to return slaves to their owners or hunt slaves down when they run away. They used to maim, beat, lynch, or simply eliminate the slaves to keep them from running (Chaney & Robertson). Southern states actively politicised and condoned this inhuman treatment only for controlling African Americans. The ethnocentrism of the dominant group held its place in the context of supremacy of Whites and Blacks were conquered to create collective presence formed by earlier slave owners. These stereotypes held completely with the belief that African American men behave as savage beasts among other things and they are also stronger than White males, can hold more pain than Whites and also crave for White women’s blood (Plous and Williams).

The way African Americans were treated and stereotypes on them have been prevalent in history. Racism is deeply rooted in the system, be it judicial system, workforce, or schools, which preserve negative thoughts on Black males, which cause lack of opportunities, employment and educational outcomes, and higher rates of incarceration, which also causes “self-fulfilling prophecy”. Even though the “Emancipation Proclamation of 1863” officially ended slavery, inhuman treatment and stereotypes never ended. From 1876 to 1965, the “Jim Crow Laws” claimed that there is still a lack of citizenship rights for African Americans as compared to White Americans. “Plessy vs. Ferguson” promoted legal racial separation back then and “White Privilege” continued since the slavery period.

Caucasians had given plush neighbourhoods to live in, higher positions, and world-class education, which is evident in modern society. Even though the “International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)” was adopted by the UN in 1965, the



USA still not followed those global standards (Henderson). The USA often advocated human rights globally and was called a human rights leader. However, Blacks have still not found equal opportunities as given in the CERD. Hence, the USA is a superpower but still poor in racial equality as compared to the rest of the world (Henderson).

African-Americans have been dehumanised constantly in the past. Slaves were considered 3/5th a person in the US constitution. Some other examples are “Jim Crow Laws”, legalizing slave lynching, and the recent police brutality on an unarmed African American man. When people are constantly dehumanised and degraded, they start believing the stereotypes of their group and develop the oppression they face. The concept of “internalised oppression” means the moment when the ideology of the dominant group is adopted by the subordinate group and they start accepting that they deserve the subordinate status and it is inevitable and natural (Aguilar).

Identity theft is known to affect a lot of African Americans as they are assigned by the identity contingencies and stereotypes by the dominant groups. It is observed in the children in early basic age groups. Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark showed a White and Black doll to children as part of a doll study in the year 1939 and asked some relevant questions. It is found that both White and Black kids had very favourable answers about the White dolls and reacted towards Black one negatively. They considered the Black doll worse, ugly, mean, and dumb. Over the past 60 years, several studies reenacted those doll studies with the same results (CNN).

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A lot of Black children used to face stereotypes on their culture from an early age and it often causes negative racial beliefs. African Americans are also stereotyped in mainstream media, especially males, as drug addicts, homeless, jobless, dumb, and criminals (Oliver). These stereotypes affect school performance of students when they take those on themselves (self-fulfilling prophecy). It also affects the jobs they get in future, their communities, socio-economic status, and family life.

5. Results

African-American males faced a lot of stereotypes in the US since slavery period. These stereotypes are deeply rooted in its culture and often cause systematic racism. There is not just one case which can stop the stereotypes on its own or the racism in the workforce, schools or judiciary. Training “cultural competency” might be the first step to eradicate stereotypes which may decline some systematic racism which is discovered in this study. Cultural competency training is required for all professionals, including law enforcement, business people, and teachers with the perspective of human rights to generate a skillset and sense of awareness to work in harmony with diverse people.

The authors know that merely cultural competency is not enough to diminish stereotypes. Another important fact is the common notion that influences the human psyche unconsciously. In



order to get away from unawareness or subconscious bias in the society, people should start processing recodification of stereotypes which are attached directly to the unconscious beliefs related to racial groups. Writers picked the autobiographical form deliberately since the mid-1920s to inspire the abolition by discussing their hardships due to slavery and atrocities they faced due to white people. Two of the most archetypal narratives of autobiography are “Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself” by “Frederick Douglass and “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” by Harriet Jacob.

The most prominent African American author of the 19th century, Douglass is known not just as the most influential, but also the most classic authors of slave narratives in American, African American and global literatures. Mediated by the abolitionists of white writer, the autobiography of Douglass comes from the “fugitive-slave” narrative tradition which is common in the North. His autobiography follows the traditional structure of major narratives given at a time. The first-person account is provided by him about his life in slavery, his writing and reading, and a turning point which led his determination to leave the bondage behind.

6. Conclusion

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Black American literature has come to limelight since the 1970s by Black authors and their works as they have got more marketplaces where they also started bagging several nominations and awards. Their literature has been well acclaimed by the academics in this era as an approved genre of literature. Various authors like Toni Morrison and James Emmanuel promoted Black literature. In addition, Alice Walker wrote an epistolary novel “The Color Purple”, a book written as letters, which is based on the story of a young woman, Celie, who is sexually assaulted by her stepdad and forced to go with her abusive husband. In addition, Rasheed Clark, Alex Haley, Jamaica Kincaid, Ishmael Reed, etc. have brought this genre to limelight across the world.

Black American literature has also been well-acclaimed by the critics in the US and there are several views on its tradition, theories, and significance. Fans of this genre believe that it came from the tragedy that Blacks faced in the US, especially related to discrimination and racism in the past. This literature is a step to refute the dominant power, cultures, and literature. It is a kind of balkanization of American works as seen in a faction supporting Black literature. There are also some people who come from Black community who hate how the blacks are often portrayed in their literature. Black community has also criticised African American literature as it often doesn't portray them in a positive light.

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