

## The Development of the African American Literary Voice

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### Abstract:

“The Development of the African American Literary Voice” explores the development of the voice of the downtrodden in American literary canon to assert their rights and liberties as they fought for the same through different means in their real lives. The paper examines how the socio-political scenario of victimization due to white supremacist racist ideology had led to their victimization and how the Blacks fought their way forward to assert themselves as a part of the American nation. Fighting racial stereotypes and prejudices, the history of African Americans is long, and so is the literary rendition.

### Keywords:

African American, Literary Voice, Racism, Rights, Slave, Victimization, White Supremacy

Before having an opportunity to establish their rights and have a say in the American nation, Africans arrived on American soil as enslaved people and endured long periods of victimization. Black Americans' history in America is one of subjugation. However, it also tells the tale of how African Americans struggled for equality and the right to live in peace on American territory. In a nutshell, the research paper provides a critical commentary on how African Americans have always fought for justice and their rights and liberties since arriving in the US. Additionally, a literary expression of the same has long been a component of American

sensibility. American literature cannot be deemed whole without the African American voices that have always been a part of American consciousness. However, white dominance had long since tamed it.

When black people first arrived in the US, they were treated worse than animals and denied the right to a dignified existence because slaves were not even given the status of citizens. Although some voices occasionally ring out from here and there, they were brutally suppressed by white racial discrimination practices. The Blacks endured physical hardship, mental anguish, psychological torture, and no means to improve their circumstances. Their sensibilities could not be expressed in artistic colors because there was no such scope for doing so.

African Americans had suffered from unfair racial stereotypes and prejudices that had taken the form of white supremacy, which had resulted in violence against them and their marginalization, segregation, discrimination, and fatalities brought on by white racist ideology, practices, and laws. African Americans first experienced victimization when brought to the US as enslaved people to work on plantations. Even after their freedom due to the American Civil War, they continued to experience victimization and discrimination due to the Jim Crow Laws, which eventually gave way to some relief during the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement in the 20th century. However, despite several legal provisions and regulations, African Americans continue to suffer the inequities of racist philosophy and behaviors in various ways.

The term "race" refers to a "flawed system of classification, created and re-created over time, that uses certain physical characteristics (such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and eye color) to divide the human population into a few supposedly discrete biological groups and attribute to their distinctive combinations of physical ability, mental capacity, personality traits, cultural patterns, and capacity for civilization" (Guest, 2017: 121). In the concept of the "collective unconscious," racial ideology refers to the beliefs and myths that are used to create stereotypes about members of a particular ethnic group to see them only in that way. The criminalization of African Americans in several facets of American life, for instance (Guest, 2017: 139 -142).

African Americans have been forced to live in continual danger of losing their lives, possessions, and resources due to racial victimization, which can take many different forms. The various types of racism include: (a) Individual racism: When a single person or group of people from a dominant race participates in prejudice against another race perceived as weaker, like when White people discriminate against Black people, Asian people, or Hispanic people. (b) Institutional racism: This is when racial segregation, discrimination, and victimization are a result of policies, systems, processes, and institutions. An example of this is the US institution of slavery, whose manifestation is still pervasive today, whether in the form of individual racism or police brutality against African Americans or in other ways. (c) Racial Ideology - Ideology is a collection of myths and ideas (in the sense of the "collective unconscious") that help shape preconceptions about members of particular ethnic communities and attempt to see them solely in that specific way. Consider how African Americans are treated like criminals in several spheres of American life. (Guest, 2017: 139 -142)

People of minority races find it challenging to live a dignified life, receive adequate credit for their accomplishments, have access to education and quality healthcare, and enjoy many other types of legitimate privileges as a result of these various racist behaviors and attitudes. Due to this, African Americans are constantly in danger and unable to fully enjoy life or reach their potential. From the late nineteenth century until the Civil Rights Movement, Black people suffered from this type of systemic racial abuse. For a very long time, African Americans battled against this. The Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement (which began in 1955 with Rosa Parks) worked to ensure that black people in America received the respect they deserved. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), for which he was imprisoned. His "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which criticized the segregationist practices of white people, is regarded as a critical document (Birmingham Campaign) (King, 1963). On October 15, 1966, in Oakland, California, university students founded the Black Panthers Party (BPP) against this backdrop of black awareness. The party's initial goal was to monitor instances of black people being subjected to discrimination and police brutality. Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton assumed leadership roles in the early stages of the party's development. They worked to popularise the party by monitoring how black people were being oppressed.

Understanding that African Americans were repeatedly criminalized as a race under white supremacy may help you to understand why police brutality was so severe in this case. In certain instances, the white racial mentality even made the institution of the police seize African Americans, victimize them, and even execute them. In other words, many black individuals are being killed by police without any cause, and their assailants are not receiving adequate justice.

However, since the Post-Civil War era, there has been a notable increase in African American literary endeavors, with writers like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others turning to autobiography, protest literature, sermons, poetry, and song writing. Since then, there has been an unstoppable surge in Black consciousness and voices, creating a black sensibility vital to American sensibility and culture. It is not that their writings were praised, but they are still being read in today's inclusive culture, where variety is valued above all else.

Prominent among the Black writers of the nineteenth century, Booker T. Washington, educator, and a black leader, in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901), recounts his successful struggle to better himself. In contrast, W.E.B. Du Bois authored "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," an essay later collected in his landmark book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and James Weldon Johnson explored the complex issue of race in his fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). Charles Waddell Chesnutt authored two collections of stories, *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), and several novels, including *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Even before these black writers came to prominence voicing their complex existential dilemmas on American soil, writers like Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (1745 - 1797) and Jupiter Hammon (1720 - 1800) had already started voicing black concerns in their writings. Hammon's *An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York* (1787) advocated freeing children of enslaved people instead of condemning them to hereditary slavery. Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), the famous black American anti-slavery leader, published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An Enslaved American* in 1845, considered one of the best slave narratives (Gates and Mckay).

The New Negro Movement in the US, known as the Harlem Renaissance, started in a black neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. As jazz and blues took off across America,

Harlem became the hub of artistic revival in literature, theatre, and music. A key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes displays in his writings a predisposition to express black awareness - a historical representation of the Negroes - and to promote the cause of the Black reawakening, founded on historical urgency and rhetorical protest (Gates and McKay). An effort has been made to comprehend how black consciousness and assertion are represented in the works examined in this paper.

Hughes' 1920 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" captures the Black consciousness that has characterized human history from the dawn of civilization to the present. The Blacks have bathed in the Euphrates, a river that is frequently considered to be the cradle of civilization because agriculture appears to have originated there; the River Congo, where they have spent a more significant portion of their history; the River Nile, where the Blacks played an essential role in the construction of the Pyramids, and the River Mississippi, where Abraham Lincoln traveled to learn about the evils of slavery in the US. The Black people have contributed to all these civilizational influences that have shaped humankind. The poem celebrates the essence of "being Black" by stating that with each experience, Blacks have "grown deep like the rivers." The Negroes are the ones who had a part in all these events, making their history and culture as significant as any other race. The river's water flow, which represents the life force of human civilization, runs more deeply in their veins. The poem affirms that Black lives count and that there is a Black civilization by celebrating the black "soul" and being a part of the Harlem Renaissance. The Euphrates to the Mississippi rivers shows that civilization has never stopped moving like river water and absorbing experiences from worldwide.

Richard Wright, another African-American writer, and poet wrote the bestseller *Native Son* (1940), and his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) represents Black consciousness to the world. His *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four stories, was the first book by a black writer to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Zora Neale Hurston is another Black female closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance and wrote many significant pieces, including *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

The significant African American dramatist August Wilson wrote in the second half of the 20th century. His play *Fences*, set in the 1950s, dramatizes the tension between Troy Maxson

and Cory, a father and son. It also touches on baseball and the American dream of success, which is difficult for a black person to accomplish in the US due to racial prejudice. The play takes place between 1957 and 1965, when the Civil Rights Movement in the US was at its height, defending the rights of the Negroes and laying the groundwork for black freedom in the world. The Harlem Renaissance was coming to a close, and black assertiveness was still reflected in artistic expressions by writers and performers like Amiri Baraka, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and August Wilson. They were tackling black issues and advocating for their rights (Gates and Mckay).

Toni Morrison, who has received international praise for her intricately woven work and has contributed significantly to the expression of black consciousness, is perhaps the most influential African-American novelist. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), three of her early works, deal with the intricacies of Black identity, whereas Toni Morrison depicts black and white relations in *Tar Baby* (1981). The tragic tale of a mother who kills her children rather than letting them live as enslaved people is told in *Beloved* (1987). *Jazz* (1992) is a drama of murder and love set in 1920s Harlem. Her 1992 nonfiction work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* tackles the politics of Black identity and literature from a novel angle to show how vital it is to link the idea of Black beauty to black consciousness. Morrison received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. In addition to Morrison, Alice Walker promoted black and feminist consciousness. Her book *The Color Purple* tells the tale of the love that endures a long separation between two underprivileged black sisters. Jamaica Kincaid and Maya Angelou are two additional critical black feminists.

Thus, over the past 200 years, black men and women have found a unique literary voice in the American consciousness. This has contributed to developing a sensibility vital to the development of the American nation because Blacks are just as much a part of the US and its formation as Whites. Racist individuals can no longer quiet and repress Black people and their presence and voices. Black people's provocative and alluring sensibilities have been and will continue to be reflected in literature and other facets of American life and aspiration.

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