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From Margin to Voice: Historical Trajectories of African-American Struggle in Women Writings

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Abstract

Historically marginalized by both racial and gender biases, African-American women have used literature as a powerful tool for resistance, self-definition and cultural expression, this paper focuses on the rich and evolving history of African-American female writers, since its inception and records the major historical situations and their historical struggles, literary innovations, emphasizing the impact and relevance of black female voices in the African-American literary landscape.

Keyword: Defiance, Sexual exploitation, Black Arts Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Segregation.

1. Introduction

The history of African-American resistance has been a dynamic interplay of political activism, cultural expression, and intellectual production. Although a significant attention has been paid to the contributions of African American male leaders and writers, the role of African-American women—particularly as literary figures has often been proscribed to the margins of scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, African-American women writers have played a critical role in articulating the complexities of racial, gendered, and social oppression, using literature as a medium of defiance and self-assertion. Their works not only respond to the historical conditions of Black life in America but also challenge dominant narratives and

reimagine possibilities for liberation.

The African-American struggle for freedom, dignity, and self-definition has been powerfully shaped by a tradition of literary resistance. From the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onward, figures such as Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper laid the groundwork for a distinctly gendered articulation of defiance—addressing not only racial oppression but also the intersecting realities of gender and class. These early writers navigated complex social constraints to produce narratives that contested dominant ideologies and asserted Black womanhood as a site of intellectual and moral authority. This paper explores the trajectories of defiance in the

writings of African American women, beginning with these early literary figures, to demonstrate how their work contributed to the broader African American struggle and established a legacy of resistance that continues to shape contemporary Black feminist thought.

2. Historical Trajectories of African-American Struggle in Women Writings

American women writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occurred under conditions of extreme constraint – slavery, limited literacy access, and pervasive social dehumanization. Within these boundaries, early writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs crafted works that subverted dominant narratives and asserted the intellectual and moral agency of Black women. Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, though composed within a Eurocentric framework, challenged prevailing assumptions about Black intellectual inferiority and subtly encoded resistance within her classical verse. In contrast, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* directly confronted the brutal realities of sexual exploitation and the moral contradictions of American slavery, offering one of the earliest autobiographical accounts from a female slave's perspective. These texts, though differing in form and tone, exemplify the ways in which early African-American women writers used the written word as a mode of defiance—reclaiming subjectivity, resisting erasure, and laying the foundation from a tradition of intersectional literary stance. The success of the North was conveyed to the southern parts through journalism and achievements made by the Blacks in North spurred the South for freedom. Though the circumstances were not very smooth in this part of the country and the grip of slavery was tighter here as compared to North. Due to the large production of cotton more and more people were enslaved for laboring and therefore instead of decreasing, the slave population, increased in the South. The first written expression came into being in the form of

fugitive slave narrative. From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the fugitive slave narratives dominated the literary landscape of antebellum black America.

Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940 brought many new awakenings in African-American thought and culture with reference to art, music, and other classic works and perhaps it is best known for the literature that came out of it. During this period the two most influential writers were Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston who gave remarkable contributions to the African-American literature in the field of poetry and fiction respectively. Some more names to be mentioned in this period are Jean Toomer, Dorothy West, Countee Cullen, Frank Marshall Davis, and Wallace Thurman. All these writers through their works brought up the agenda of racism and slavery before the people. The large scale migration of African-Americans during World War I and II gave them the wisdom of sovereignty to the Blacks and strengthened the American Civil Rights Movements, Black activists demanded end of segregation and racism and the Black writers contributed in this objective in their own way. Black writers addressed the various issues of racism, sexuality, discrimination etc. in their writings. During the Civil Rights time period many female Black poets also came in fame. The well noted Gwendolyn Brooks who was the first African-American recipient to the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry book, *'Anne Allen'*. Some other female poets of fame were Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. During this time, some of the playwrights also gained attention. They were Lorraine Hansberry, writer of play, *'A Raisin in the Sun'* and Amiri Baraka, the writers of several plays.

Though Harlem Renaissance is often considered as an awakening in African-American literature, but the fact remains that the true African-American renaissance occurred during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is the time when the black Americans produced the most remarkable writings. And

was proved when Toni Morrison became the first African-American to win the Nobel Prize in the year 1993. The responsibility is equally shared by the writers like August Wilson, Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, Charles Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, Ntozake Shange and George Wolfe etc. In the year 1970, one of the parallel struggle started that was of the 'Black Woman' in America. Hortense Spillers calls that 'the emergence of the community of black women writing' is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary period. 'The Black Woman', an anthology edited by the Toni Cade Bambara, heralded an effect by black women to define themselves.

One of the most important times in African-American literature was the beginning of The Black Arts Movement or BAM. It was the artistic branch of the Black Power Movement. The movement was started in Harlem by writer and activist Amiri Baraka. The movement is recalled as the "Single most controversial movement in the history of African-American literature—possibly in American literature as a whole." ("A Brief Guide to" 2014) The movement encouraged black people to bring out their own publishing houses, magazines, journals and art institutions.

The Black Arts Movement posits the idea of Black Aesthetics which refers to ideologies and perspectives of art that centre around Black culture and life. As Larry Neal manifests in his well known essay on the 'Black Arts Movement', "When we speak of a "Black aesthetic" several things are meant. First we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of the Third World culture. The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of the white ideas and white ways of looking at the world." (Black Arts Movement) Thus, the focus

was on the acclimation to a new non-racial cultural formation.

3. Major Happenings in 19th Century:

Another impetus was the emergence of a community of black women writing. During 1960's and 1970's the issues of gender trumped issues of race for the black women writing. Gender theory came to the forefront for black women who laid its emphasis on the rights of women in contemporary societies, women's identity, and the representation of women in media and culture. The inability of black men and white women to admit and denounce their oppression of black women paved the way for the inception of the Black Feminist Movement in the year 1973. Long before the inception of "womanhood" as an important aspect of black women identity, black women remained silent and did not demand social equality and recognition of the impact of sexism on their social status. As Bell Hooks remarks "Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification." (Hooks 1990, 1)

In the year 1851 Sojourner Truth delivers *Ain't I a woman?* at Women's Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio. Truth was an extraordinary self-possessed person. As a fugitive, she met William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and other prominent anti slavery activists. Sojourner Truth became popular for her ability to deliver informal and fiery speeches denouncing slavery. Another prolific and popular African-American women writer in the year 1854 was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Her popular work '*Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*' includes poems that are believed to be in the tradition of African-American protest poetry. Her poems "address the need to end slavery and the importance of Christian living, equal rights, and racial pride, ideals that Harper advocated throughout her long career." (Gates 1996, 491-92) Through her preaching, Harper asserted that "Emancipation

had opened a new era, a time for blacks, particularly black women, to "consecrate their lives to the work" of up building the race." (Gates 1996, 492) Harper believed that literature can be used to represent, to reprimand as well as to revise.

In the year 1859, Harriet Adams Wilson's *Our Nig* or *Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North*, became the first novel by an African- American woman in black American literature. The novel undoubtedly, has an autobiographical tone focusing on the struggles of a young, single, black woman to achieve economic independence and self respect. The characters' faith in herself and her defiance to her oppressor is represented by Wilson as an act of self-reclamation and spiritual regeneration. *Our Nig* remains a hallmark of black women's fiction in the United States.

The years 1861 to 1865 were the years of American Civil war and it was then in 1861 Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* came as the foremost slave narrative written by an African-American woman. Jacob's narrative became the first hand example of the injustices that women suffered under slavery. Reflecting her pain she accounts in the preface of her work.

In the year 1875 while congress passed Civil Rights Act of equal treatment to African-Americans in public places and access to jury duty, Women's Christian Temperance Union was founded in Ohio in 1874. However, in the year 1883, Supreme Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Oklahoma was admitted as the first state with women's Suffrage in the year 1890. In the year 1892, appeared Anna Julia Cooper's work, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. Cooper was one of the first African-Americans to receive a Ph.D. Throughout her life, she was committed to education for black people, women in particular. She participated in the first meeting of her National Conference of Colored Women, and in 1900 she participated in the Pan-African

Conference in London. She also helped in editing 'The Southland' magazine. Cooper conceived the idea that education and elevation of black women was extremely important for racial upliftment, as societies may be best evaluated by the status of their female members. In Cooper's words, "the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retraining of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the black woman" (Gates 1996, 636).

Like her contemporaries, Cooper considered the 1890's as 'women's era'. The Norton Anthology accounts for her "Black women, Cooper believed, were especially well situated to analyze and offer solutions to society's injustices because of their position as women in a sexist society and as black people in a racist society... the development of black women's faculties through higher education crucial not only to the "regeneration of a race" but to the progress of the nation and the world." (Gates 1996, 636)

Thus, through her writing *Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a race*, Cooper laid the emphasis over black woman education and their role as central figure in the development of African-American community. The year 1896 proved to be important as the Supreme Court approved segregation with 'separate but equal' ruling. Besides, National League of Colored Women and National Federation of Afro-American Women merged to form National Association of Colored Women appointing Mary Church Terrell as its president. With Spanish-American war of 1898, Charles W. Chesnutt, writing *The Coujure Woman*, *The Wife of His Youth* and 'Other Stories of the Colorline'. In the year 1900, Pauline F Hopkins came up as an active contributor of the *Colored American Magazine*, "a journal which was a crucial forum for creative writing, reportage, scholarship and progressive political commentary." (Gates 1996, 650) Hopkins wrote both fiction and nonfiction. Her works accentuated mainly the female protagonists

portrayed as “strikingly beautiful, extremely talented, well educated, strongly courageous, and indelibly virtuous.” (Gates 1996, 651)

In the year 1903, came *The Souls of Black Folk* by the most multifaceted, prolific, and influential writer of African-American culture, namely, W.E.B. Du Bios. His book includes a collection of essays on African-American history, sociology, religion, politics and, music. According to the Norton Anthology- “From the beginning of his book, Du Bios introduces his white reader to peculiar dualities and conflicts in African-American self-perception—known ever since by Du Bios’s term *double-consciousness* which for Du Bios defined both the crux of black American’s struggle to identify themselves and the crucible in which their African and American identities could be merged into a unity of which they and the nation could be proud.” (Gates 1996, 687)

In the year 1920, women suffrage was granted by accrediting the 19th Amendment. In the following years, Harlem Renaissance and post World War II, black artists and writers produced an increasing amount of work influenced by black aesthetics. Looking into the contribution of Black women in these years brings into the notice, the work of Marita Bonner in the year 1928. Her works primarily include short stories, essays, and plays. “The Purple Flower” is one of her most famous play. Bonner in particular, laid the emphasis on racial and gender identity in her literary contributions. She too believed that in order to overcome inequalities one should gain knowledge and education. She was strongly against the black women sexism and racism. In her essay, “On being Young- A Woman-And Colored” published in 1925, she addressed the negative conditions of black women and the essay encourages black women not to inhabit along with their problems but to overcome adverse situations.

Another woman writer in the same year was Nella Larsen who wrote two novels

Quicksand and *Passing*. Larsen was the first black woman to whom Guggen he in fellowship was granted for the creative writing. Her works document the racial and sexual obscurities of the blacks. Another contemporary among the above was Jessie Redmon Fauset, the literary editor of the NAACP magazine, ‘*The Crisis*.’ She was a story believer of the teachings of W.E.B. Du Bios. In African-American literary canon she is marked as one of the most intelligent women novelist and was named as ‘the midwife’. On recognizing the absence of positive images of African-American experience in the contemporary literature she depicted their life realistically and positively in her novels *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1928), *Chinaberry* (1931), and *Comedy American Style* (1933).

One of the most extraordinary women writers among the black was Zora Neale Hurston. Her best known works are *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). She also contributed short stories like, *The Gilded Six Bit*, *Drenched in Light*, and *Spunk*. In her book *Mules and Men*, Hurston presented a collection of folk tales. Hurston also wrote her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* in 1942 which brought her into controversies as she criticized the white America for its hypocrisy and racism. However, she remains one of the important writer who has greatly influenced the writers such as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara. Black women writers “accept the complex wisdom of this woman who refused to be *tragically colored*.” (Gates 1996, 1022) Along with Hurston, Margaret Walker an American poet and writer contributed to the African-American literary movements. She authored award winning poem, *For My People* (1942) and the novel *Jubilee* (1966).

4. Shades of Accomplishments

The beginning of the year 1970 and after brought African-American women writers to the mainstream as the female writers continued to achieve best selling and award winning status.

Alice Walker, the famous novelist and poet of 1970's wrote *The Color Purple*. She got the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her work. Other important writers and their popular works to name are *Roots: The saga of an American Family* written by Alex Haley, Gayl Jones, Rasheed Clark, Ishmael Reed, Maya Angelou etc. Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and became a Poet Laureate of the United States from the year 1993 to 1995. Though a play writer but the most effective and recognized black woman Ntozake Shange produced *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* and became the second African-American woman to reach Broadway. Three of the most persuasive postmodern novels by black women are Toni Cade Bambara's *The Saltaters* (1980), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Alice Walker's *In the Temple of My Familiar* (1989).

An exceptionally popular novelist among the Black women writers and in particular to the study is Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate in the year 1993. Morrison stepped the arena of Black literature with her novel *The Bluest Eye* in the year 1970 and since then never looked back. She has been critically celebrated not only for her incisive analysis of the dynamics of race and gender but also for the lyricism of her language and the inventive originality of her plots. She has published eleven and to her collection she added a short fiction *Recitatif* (1983); Plays *Dreaming Emmett* (performed 1986), *Desdemona* (first performed May 15, 2011, in Vienna); Non-fiction *The Black Book* (1974), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (editor) (1992), *Birth of a Nation' hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case* (co-editor) (1997), *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (April 2004), *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, edited by Carolyn C. Denard (April 2008), *Burn This Book: Essay Anthology*, editor (2009); Article "Introduction." Mark

Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." (1996). Toni Morrison's fame can be undoubtedly accounted on her endless list of awards and prizes.

5. Conclusions

Thus, the female struggle of African-American have been a plethora of cultural identity, racism, sexism, quest for equality etc. the literary canon of African-American study is in fact incomplete without a fair inclusion of its female writers, the struggle of female writers to include their voices into the history of African-American literature has stood the test of time and remains unchanged to this day and yet is still unfolding the yearnings of black female writers to the mainstream.

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