

## African American Women Writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

**Dr. Feroz Ahmad Dar**

Assistant Lecturer  
GDC Dooru Anantnag  
Jammu and Kashmir

### Abstract

The 20th century has been an epoch making period for the African American literary tradition as a result of the huge commitments made by African American female writers during this century. The ten works of these African American women writers are significant. This paper starts by exploring the historical and critical backdrop of African American women writers before examining some of the major themes and influential authors. African American women writers focus on problems of race, colour, roots, motherhood, relationships, identity, women's roles and representations, community, the supernatural and the spiritual, recovering and reviving buried histories, and sexism as much as racism. The writings of Anne Petry, Gloria Naylor, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larson, Ntozake Shange, and Maya Angelou are discussed, while additional authors are referenced in passing.

**Keywords:** Epoch making, African American, Historical, Backdrop, Identity, Motherhood.

### Introduction

African American women writers, such as, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and many others have revised the current scholarly traditions by communicating and making a profound effect on the African American, artistic field. Crafted by these women writers resound with self-articulation, in this way accomplishing a standard status and enhancing African American as well as the American abstract world. These authors do not write about themselves, but also about African American women. African American women writers have given readers incredible experiences into troubling issues, for example, race, gender and class, but before one makes a profound investigation into crafted by these women writers, it is exceptionally fundamental for think

about their past.

These women writers began to communicate genuinely and openly unexpectedly. Their works turned into their pronouncement. Their works without a doubt depict their development, battle and achievement. The 20th century women writers have investigated each conceivable sort of writing: fiction, nonfiction, formal, casual, poetry, stories, papers, autobiographies and others. They have contracted obscure regions and set another remarkable pattern.

African American women writers have an exceptional but forbidding past. Their forerunners were scrapped out from the continent of Africa and got America as slaves. African people were tormented, mistreated, persecuted and misused beyond imagination. Showing up in America, these African men, ladies and kids were deliberately and lawfully ransacked of their humankind. Anyway the arrangement of subjection demonstrated significantly severer for African women. They were robbed of their regard, poise and personality. They confronted viciousness because of their white masters not just as hard work and whipping lashes but also became an unwanted victim of sexual exploitation. These women were frequently assaulted by their white bosses and their kids sold away by them. Harihar Kulkarni writes in this specific circumstance:

The brutal treatment that the black women received during slavery invariably left profound scars on their psyche. Their physical bondage ultimately turned into a psychological bondage causing mutation and mutilations of their world. The external forces operating at the socioeconomic levels came to bear an unmistakable relationship to the internal fears, worries, anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and frustration. The poisonous fangs of slavery manifested themselves in innumerable ways and finally determined the behavioral pattern of black women. (59)

This generalization of African American people particularly that of African American women devastatingly affected them. It influenced them at different levels: physical, mental, moral as well as intellectual. In this manner the black people were refuted to mere human adaptable capital, and named as mediocre and degraded. In these testing times, black women attempted to keep themselves, their kids and whatever they could clutch alive. While quietly enduring the revulsions of bondage, African American women made an honest effort to keep up their self-esteem and self-identity.

Right from the times of servitude to the present, African American women have been confronting the triple persecution of prejudice, sexism and style. Maya Angelou intensely discusses the situation of African American women, “caught in the tripartite crossfire of manly prejudice, white outlandish contempt and Black absence of power” (65). These African American women face prejudice from whites, both men and women; gender segregation, both by whites as well as their African American men; and style through being economically incapacitated and placed on the most lowest rung of society. Gloria Wade Gayles suitably portrays the unsafe situation of African American women:

American is an oppressive system that divides people into groups on the basis of their race, sex and class, creating a society in which a few have capital and therefore are able to influence the lives of many. There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerless. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. (3-4)

It is the people of black color who have consistently less been near the unjustified edge of society and they were subjugated at every level. Exploring into the past, one can obviously see that African American women have been engraved into an interaction of persecution and exploitation bringing about a specific codification of these women.

As per Patricia Collins, women's presence is structured along three associated dimensions which all work through persecution—economy, polity and belief system. Society has regularly utilized economy as a way to constrain individuals of color into all-devouring action with the goal that they have basically no or not many chances to do any sort of scholarly work. Also through the element of polity, black women have regularly been rejected of rights and advantages which are promptly accessible to male residents. Finally, philosophy addresses the interaction by which black women have frequently been related with specific characteristics and it is used to legitimize the ongoing oppression.

Hence, one sees that American culture has triply weakened and disappointed African American women. Among these three persecutions, racism is the most remarkable

exploitation, which African American ladies have been confronting. It began with them being brought as slaves and proceeds till now. African American people have frequently been detested and degraded on account of their black skin color. Sidney W. Mints writes in this specific circumstance:

The word —slave still carries the visual picture of obscurity to North American personalities. This relationship of constrained work and corruption with people groups of a specific actual sort is an incredible image of the degree to which social discernments are generally molded. (34)

In verifiable records, subjection in the United States of America finished after the Civil War with the beginning of the thirteenth Amendment. However, racism actually proceeds in American culture in one structure or the other. The subjugation of African American individuals into chattel slavery, the next hundred years of assaulting of African American women, lynching and mutilating of both black men and women, has deeply affected African American individuals. They have been living the life of ‘invisible’.

African American womwn endured the worst part of racialism to the extreme. They were named as ‘niggers’ and — ‘black bitches’. In a dogmatic white society, African American women turned into the embodiment of offensiveness and extreme aversion, while white women were viewed as a symbol of purity. As indicated by Thomas S. Szase, “Americans have utilized this darkness and madness as their norms and extraordinary images of evil, and whiteness and mental stability as their guidelines and otherworldly images of good”(68). Being African American in drop has placed these women into a more enslaved position and cast them in a more mediocre situation than the black men. Based on race and their skin Colour African American women have been deliberately imprisoned from each favorable part of life.

African American women’s plight does not end with the oppression of racism, she faces yet another kind of brutal oppression based on gender that is, sexism. She not only leads the life of black but also a woman, and thus, she is in a double disadvantaged position of being black and a woman in a white American patriarchal society. Lorraine Bethel writes explaining the subjugated position of the African American woman owing to her colour and gender:

Black women embody by their sheer physical presence two of the most hated identities in this racist/sexist country. Whiteness and maleness in this culture have not only been seen as physical identities but codified into states of being and world views. The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms —thinking

like a woman<sup>l</sup> and —acting like a nigger<sup>l</sup>, both based on the premise that these are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore the most pejorative concept in the white male world view would be thinking and acting like a —nigger woman. (178)

The sexism and its oppression started simultaneously with racism for black women when they were enslaved. They were made to work along with black men in plantations, but also were sexually abused by their white masters. Besides hard labour in the day, they became sex objects for white slave masters in the night. They were

rampantly raped and forced to procreate a new breed of slaves which were to be sold off. Even after gaining freedom, African American women have been often raped and their modesty outraged by white men.

Thus, an African American woman is gotten between crossfires of bigotry and sexism and bears the oppression from both white as well as black men. She finds herself pushed to the verge. Similarly as she has been influenced by prejudice, comparably she is additionally immobilized by sexism. Similarly as white men have misused her, so have black men.

African American women additionally experience the ill effects of style. They are the most un-special contrasted with white people, white women and African American men. They are situated on the most minimal bar of the financial and social stepping stool. Right from the times of subjugation, however she has been working similarly alongside black men, yet she is considered as the least deserving. Harihar Kulkarni appropriately portrays in the following passage how African American women have been financially looted and stifled:

The American slavery that was basically embedded in capitalistic ideals exploited black

women as an essential part of labor force. The economics of slavery forced black woman into a precarious situation. As a black, she was exploited for her skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops, as a woman she was also asked to perform a reproductive role vital to the planter's financial interest and to the interest of the expansive system of slavery in general. (57).

African American women have been dealing with their children, their family and are a necessary piece of the African American social milieu, but she is the most disregarded class. She has less of all that would make half for a respectable life. Subsequently, they are financially oppressed and in the most weak position, and carry on with the existence of imperceptible residents in America.

While triple oppression is unmistakably clear and has spoiled African American women's lives, some critics are not happy with this 'triple persecution' theory. They regularly accept that African American women have confronted considerably more extreme oppressive conditions. Deborah King in "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness" states that African American women not only face triple oppression but also other types of disempowerment. All these numerous types of disappointment results in exponential disempowerment. King clarifies, "The modifier 'multiple' alludes not to a few concurrent mistreatments but rather to the multiplicative connections among them also. In other words the same plan is prejudice duplicated by sexism, increased by classicism" (297). Whether it is —"double jeopardy", "triple oppression" or "multiple jeopardy" it is plainly clear that it has significantly influenced every African American woman's life.

The 20th century has been an earth shattering period for African American women writers. It is in this time that they at long last emerged from the shadows of racism and sexism and created works with no restraints. They caused a convention of African American women's writing. 20th century African American women writers didn't begin writing unexpectedly. They were enhancing a convention which existed significantly sooner. Prior writers had constructed a safe stage for these 20th century writers. Thus the foundations of the 20th century African American women writer's goes ways back to the occasions when African American ladies were not free residents.

Curiously the main African American scholarly artist was not a man, but an African American slave woman known as Lucy Terry. Her folk song “Bars fight” the first Literary work created began a long convention of African American writing. Phyllis Wheatley, a slave girl, was maybe the primary critical and striking African American literary artist to be perceived and appreciated because of her works. She wrote verse copying European literary artists. Sadly she died malnourished and still a slave. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs were yet other significant slave writers.

Francis Harper, was perhaps the main nineteenth century African American women writers who clearly discussed the continuous persecution against black women. Harper utilized writing as her apparatus, for advocating the reason for African American women. Alice Ruth Dunbar Nelson was a significant post bellum writer whose abstract works frequently talk about black women’s equivalent rights. The commitments of these prior authors can scarcely be denied since they associate before the war and post bellum. African American women's literature while creating a bridge to contemporary writings in the custom (Foster 26). They made a sound foundation for future 20th century African American women writers who might later beginning another section in African American writing. The topics and issues of early African American women authors reverberates in the scholarly works of the 20th century women authors.

The 20th century proclaimed another age, for African American women's literature as well as for American literature also. It was a period which saw African American women writers being freed from quite a past and composing with another self-arousing. They finally began composing and characterizing themselves instead of being characterized by others. They broke the limits of prejudice, sexism and class set by white man centric culture.

The time-period of 20th century African American women's writing can be comprehensively separated. These wide divisions have their own exceptional subjects and approaches. The writing in the early couple of many years of the 20th century was described by social phenomena called Harlem Renaissance. Clarifying the wonders of Harlem Renaissance, Sharon L. Jones writes:

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, began in the early

1900, and ended around 1940. Coinciding with modernist trends, the Harlem Renaissance was an interdisciplinary cultural movement that reflected literary, musical, dance, artistic, and dramatic developments in African American expression. Additionally, the civil rights movement and the rise of organizations for social justice also brought much to bear upon the Harlem Renaissance. This movement would have a wide-ranging impact on American literature, changing the growth and direction of what was valued and what was not. (227)

The times of 1960s and 1970s are another significant stage in 20th century African American women's writing. It was described by the way of talking that “Black is beautiful”, however above all black women writers began to compose with another intensity investigating issues like family viciousness, poverty, abuse, bigotry, sexism and intimidation.

This stage saw the rise of writers, such as, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Margaret Walker, Sherley Ann Williams, Mari Evans and a large group of other skilled writers. All these literary specialists had their own unique focus and scholarly style delivering works so rich and different in the treatment of themes and furthermore style. The 20th century African American women's writing saw the coming of another stage.

The time of 1970s was predominantly overwhelmed by Black Arts Movement (BAM). Black Arts Movement was an imaginative part of the Black Power Movement began by African American essayist and activist Amiri Baraka. African American women writers were profoundly impacted by this development and multiplied both as writer and activist. Their works were social examination as well as literary experimentation. To quote Eleanor W. Traylor:

Women writers of the BAM entered every literary genre and constructed a language that took poetry to the taverns, streets, bars, housing projects, libraries, prisons, parks, newly founded theatres, and time honored churches, language that redirected the conventional expectations of the stage, that interrupted the familiar story told in autobiography, that introduced new discourses, reconstructed the generic expectations of fictions, and that set the premises of theoretically invested essays. (51-52)

The last decade of the 20th century, 1990s proved to be the coming of age for African



American women's literature. Presently the topics and stories were more assorted and characters more incorporated than ever. These works solidified African American Women's author's experiences. By 1990s, African American women writers had made, recreated and reconsidered conventional tropes and designs. They had investigated each conceivable class, extended their rubric and rebelled against all kind of 'isms'. The last decades of the 20th century additionally saw the ascent of popular fiction. Popular fiction is additionally a fundamental component of African American literature for they likewise are important for an artistic pattern. They additionally are to accomplish a status of sanctioned structure sooner rather than later.

The 20th century African American women writers are very much integral to African American women literature and have advanced American artistic convention with their own extraordinary point of view. These writers have caused a change in outlook in African American writing. Fighting against racial oppression and their own black men's abuse, they have cut their own specialty. Their effect can be felt not just in the field of writing yet in each part of African American life. They have acquired another change the perspective and feeling in the existences of African American people, particularly that of African American women.

In particular, 20th century African American women writers have broken new grounds, created new abstract standards and paved the way for twenty first century writers. Today young and dynamic writers, who are making another upsurge in the artistic world, are in one way or the other indebted to these 20th century African American women authors. To end, it is well-suited to cite Dana E. Williams who writes about these phenomenal African American women writers:

Clearly, even as contemporary African American women authors write to distinguish themselves, they also inevitably enhance the grand tradition of American letters. And they do so by telling their multifaceted stories....What we find in contemporary African American women writers are many 'black girls' singing their own songs and they sing them bravely, boldly, and remarkably. (85)

**References:**

1. Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. NY: Bentham Books, 1971.
2. Baker, Houston A. Jr. *Black Literature in America*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1971.
3. Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelist: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.
4. Kulkarni, Harihar. *Black Feminist Fiction: A March Towards Liberation*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999.
5. Williams, Dana A. —Contemporary African American Women Writers. In *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.