

ECHOING CASCADES

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CONTENTS

- 1 African American Feminist Literary Theory - A Post
Modern Evaluation 1
Dr. N. Geetha
- 2 Modality of Jazz in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* 7
Dr.A.Roselin Mary
- 3 Black Vernacular in Langston Hughes Poetry 15
E. Seetha Selvam
- 4 Creating Space in the Literary Canon of African
American Women's Slave Narratives 19
Dr. Gomez Sophia & Dr. N. Geetha
- 5 African - American Literature : A Boon to Black
Americans 24
Sr. Dr. B.J.Queensly Jeyanthi
- 6 Challenges to Champions: A Slave Narrative in *Up
From Slavery* Booker T. Washington 30
Dr. A. Muthu Meena Losini
- 7 A Study of Maya Angelou's Ideological Predicaments
and Moorings 36
Dr. D. Laura Dameris Chellajothi
- 8 Mental Trauma and Personal Testimony in Maya
Angelou's Poetry 43
Dr. C. Arul Theresa

AFRICAN - AMERICAN LITERATURE: A BOON TO BLACK AMERICANS

Sr. Dr. B.J.QUEENSLY JEYANTHI

African slavery was introduced in America but that slavery brought many blessings to them in the blessings in the disguise. The autobiographies written by the former slave have had an enormous significance for the birth of African American literature, also the understanding of the system of slavery as a whole. There is a famous quote by Robert Penn Warren: "*History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.*" History is vital for understanding this period in literature, because it greatly affected the work of African Americans. They struggled for freedom until they managed to influence the political scene and their lives were able to escape the evils of slavery.

The slavery in America was introduced by the Spanish. They wanted to use the native Indians for work on their fields and mines, but since the Indians were not used to that kind of labour, they did not have as much strength as the Spanish thought they would. So to save them from extinction, they decided to bring the black people from Africa, because it was well known that they were strong and hardworking. They started with the working at the factories and the need for cotton started to grow more and more, so the Africans had to work harder than ever. But not even the strong African people could never bear the inhumane conditions and actions of their supervisors. The whole world was rocked by the stories about the deaths of black slaves, and the outrageous behaviour of the white masters and overseers.

Finally, the movement towards the abolition of slavery was born. William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay were the ones who founded the society for the abolition of slavery. The first thing they did was the law which stopped slave trading and with that, after the 1840 the England did not have a single slave. The Revolution in 1848 brought the same changes to France, Portugal followed in 1858 and Netherlands in 1861. In

the United States of America, this has led to some serious complications, and eventually to a long-lasting war. Even though the Declaration of Independence states that "all men were created equal", that did not include those whose skin was dark and those who worked on the plantations in the South. As time passed, the North started openly showing the dislike for the institution of slavery, but the South claimed that they need the slaves to work in their cotton fields. The Congress and the Senate debated about the question of slavery for almost fifty years. Neither North nor South wanted to give in. The greatest moment of danger was when the southern states threatened to leave the Union. But this danger was ended, thanks to one of the most notable men of the American history, Abraham Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln was elected as president in 1860, and he was the first Republican president ever elected. He got known to the public when he spoke against the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which said that in each new state in the West, the decision about every problem; including the problem of slavery, will be brought by the people, not by the governmental bodies). The Republicans were strongly against slavery, and Lincoln was aware of how the southerners are treating the slaves so he had to do something about it. When several Southern states started to create a "Confederation", he started gathering volunteers to fight back. The war was going on for four years. The South was better equipped and managed to defeat the North several times, with the two great leaders on its side: Lee and Jackson.

On January 1st 1863, Lincoln declared the Emancipation act. He tried to stop the spreading of the slavery, and claimed that each territory has to be open only to free people. The South fought strongly and bravely, but eventually they had to give in. Several days after, President Lincoln got murdered, but his actions remained. The slavery was abolished in the whole world, beside Cuba which was then under the Spanish government

Booker T. Washington was an American writer and educationist, born a slave on a plantation in Virginia in 1858. Despite his efforts, he did not manage to retrieve any information about his ancestry. He had no

education or whatsoever while being in slavery, but always had a thirst for knowledge. In the beginning of his book, he recalls the early years of his life, and the conditions in which he lived. He did not sleep on a real bed, he ate the leftovers of his masters and he had to wear the flax cloth which he hated.

African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture. The strong presence of African American literature has paved the way for the emergence of Native American, Asian American, and Chicano American streams of literatures. It is only with the significant representation of African American literature American society stands to be cleansed from the problem of racial discrimination. African American literature has examined the problem of racial discrimination in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects. It has travelled from mid 18th century with slave narratives to the current times with all its socio literary exuberance initiating a literary and cultural transformation in the fabric of American society.

The African-American literary tradition implies the fact that African-American culture is the culture of suppressed people. The history of African-American people is marked with slavery (1619-1865) which is characterized by continuous dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation, and exploitation. African-Americans were viewed as people with no history, no cultural heritage, no tradition, and no identity in white America. For centuries Europeans and Americans advanced racial theories of inferiority, which ascribed African-Americans to the lower species and ignored their ownership of cultural, ethic and linguistic values. In an interview, one of the leading contemporary African-American authors, Toni Morrison states that prejudice and racism against African-Americans has had two purposes: it has been a distraction against recognizing the unfair class differences in the country, and it has united as Americans all other immigrants, who can claim to be white and therefore part of the mainstream simply because they are not black (Morrison, 2008, 53). However, according to Morrison, America would not be what it is without the presence of blacks. The writer believes that America was "incoherent" without the inclusion of African-Americans' contributions to the forming of the nation, its history, language, literature,

and culture (Christian, 2000, 75). She presents a similar view in her book of essays on the presence of blackness in American literature *Playing in the Dark* (1992) in which she is trying to prove that Africanism is an inseparable part in defining Americanness. Thus Morrison views black American history as the history of whole American experience (Morrison, 1993, 14). Slave trade was greatly related to racial prejudices and racial segregation. Although in 1865 slavery was abolished in America, the South was still governed by white politicians. Ku-Klux-Klan, an organization established in 1865, oppressed and terrorized the blacks. Racial inequality and stereotypes were imposed on all aspects of Black Americans' lives – education, literature, music, art. Black women had to face a twofold struggle because they suffered both racial prejudice and sexual abuse by the white masters and black males. African- American women treated as slaves were depicted as animals and prostitutes.

In African-American culture there is a link between the past and the present, a combination of cultural memory, the African experience and cosmogony (the origin of the universe, or a set of ideas about this). In the United States, the African tradition and experience was modified by the Christian one, a new type of culture and literature was being formed.

The emergence of African American Women writings brought in double jeopardy of racism in Black Women's movement. Gloria Hull examined the dilemma of Black women in *All the Men are Black. All the Women are White, But Some of Us are Brave*. This has made many black women to turn toward each other for a better introspective and analytical understanding of Black Women's problems. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) addressed the question of how self-identity and respect is achieved by a black girl in a society, which hardly values her existence. These novels have explored folk heritage, slavery and mother hood. Elucidating African American literature has become a challenging task to every critic and academician. The literary and critical survey of African American literature offers a cross racial, cross-cultural scholarship necessarily for literary excellence and human importance.

The African American slaves have had a long period of agonizing battle for their freedom, and one of their weapons was their writing. They wrote their accounts on the lives in slavery, of the tortures they went through under the hands of their brutal masters, their escapes from slavery and their fight for the abolition of slavery, for human rights. I can assure that only African –American literature has brought out the pathetic condition of the Black Americans their dehumanization and their slavery and various atrocities that are being met by African –American. Only literature has ripped off the scales of brutalism in the eyes of the Americans and the whole world.

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