

NEGRO LITERATURE IN THE USA IN THE 18TH-EARLY 20TH CENTURIES: PROBLEMS OF HISTORY AND INTERPRETATION

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Abstract:

In America, racism spread around the country especially in the South. Black people were treated offensively. They did not have full rights as the white citizens. Due to these facts, many black writers responded with a set of literary works and used their skills in writing to reflect on their life. Thus, they have reached an artistic level and produced creative works. African American literature involves poetry and slave narratives.

Key words: Negro slaves, sharia, African literature, century.

African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture. It is only with the significant representation of African American literature that 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 traveled from mid 17th 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.

Thus, this research work is an attempt to deal with the emergence of African American Literature which has appeared due to some historical events. It provides the readers with an overview of this kind of literature starting from the seventeenth century with the importation of African slaves by Europeans till the nineteenth century which was described by the development of African American works in the area of literature. On the basis of these considerations a research question have been formulated for the present study :

- What are the reasons of the development of the African American Literature? This question would lead to the formulation of the following research hypothesis :



➤ Racism and equality, are very likely to be one of the reasons of the development of African American Literature .

Therefore, the current research work is divided into two interrelated chapters. The first chapter provides historical background of African American literature then, it deals with the main African American movements from the colonial to the contemporary field.

This research work deals with African American literature. In America precisely in the South, African slavery in America is a controversial subject in society and in history. It brings forth feelings of guilt in populations in the West, whose ancestors hundreds of years ago may have participated in the buying and selling of fellow human beings. These social and historical events pushed many African Americans to be poets and writers. Their journey dates back from the colonial period till the present. They want to get social justice and freedom. The first chapter of this research work provide a historical background, definitions and the main achievements of black writers from the colonial period till the present. Moreover, the main literary movements are listed. It is also important for the readers to know the reasons behind the appearance of black literature.

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. Before understanding the origin of African American literature, it is necessary to know the main problems of that period. The problem of race and tensions of color pushed African Americans to use writing to establish a place for themselves in that community. The English contributed to the issue of segregation. They had developed the concept of inferiority and distinction through drawing on preconceptions rooted in images of blackness and physical differences between the two peoples (Bruce 02). Those negative images were created by English adventurers and traders who visited the African Continent. The literature read at that time in England offered a negative portrayal of Africans and their ways of life. The Africans were described as ruthless and cruel and even as ugly people. Early in the 18th century, laws excluded the testimony of the black in court particularly in the South. In many colonies, the free black paid punitive taxation and were prohibited from having property. In Virginia, some blacks lost the right to vote African



Americans were given different names like 'Colored' 'Negros' 'Black' and 'African American'. In fact, African American literature embodies novels, poems and plays showing the status of race as a whole. The writers' works reflect their identities (Warren 05). African American literature presents a wide range of writings from the colonial period to the present. It is related to different literary periods: The colonial period (1746-1800), antebellum period (1800-1865), the reconstruction period (1865-1900), the protest movement (1960-1969) and contemporary period (1970-present). Early in the 18th century, laws excluded the testimony of the black in court especially in the South. In several colonies, the free black paid punitive taxation and were prohibited from owning property. In Virginia, some blacks lost the right to vote. They were brought against their will and many wives were separated from their husbands and were given to others (64). African Americans were given different names like 'Colored' 'Negros' 'Black' and 'African American'. In fact, African American literature embodies novels, poems and plays showing the status of race as a whole. The writers' works reflect their identities (Warren 05). African American literature presents a wide range of writings from the colonial period to the present. It is related to different literary periods: The colonial period (1746-1800), antebellum period (1800-1865), the reconstruction period (1865-1900), the protest movement (1960-1969) and contemporary period (1970-present).

Within the span of a hundred years, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a tide of emigration swept from Africa to America. This movement, impelled by powerful and diverse motivations, shaped the character and destiny of an continent. One of the captured slaves who were transported to colonial America was Wheatley. In her writings, she focuses on the contrast between slavery and freedom (Jarrett 22). Because of racism, many African-American writings were not accepted as authentic works such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Through poetry, sermons, letters and slave narratives, African American literature of the colonial period was a means of breaking the bonds of slavery. In New England, those slaves who were close with their masters' families exchanged stories. They described their lives before slavery in Africa and their daily activities. Those stories suggest a kind of awareness of the issues of slavery (Dickson 20). The issue of slavery and the revolutionary war led to the development of African American writings. Their poems and letters reflect the African Americans' suffering.



The Antebellum Period (1800-1865)

During The Antebellum Period many black slaves focused on the narration of their stories such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Well Brown. At that time literature was an instrument for the abolition of slavery. It consists of abolitionists' poems and slaves' narrations which show injustice and bondage of slavery. During this period, many abolitionist newspapers appeared such as The Liberator, which gave a chance to the slaves to tell their stories. For instance, William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the Liberator and Lydia Maria Child edited Harriet Jacob's Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl (Jones 37). The Antebellum Period in American history is generally considered to be the period before the civil war and after the War of 1812. It was characterized by the rise of abolition and the gradual polarization of the country between abolitionists and supporters of slavery. During the nineteenth century, Blacks decided to revolt against the situation. There were strong leaders such as Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner in Virginia. Unfortunately, many rebels failed and their leaders were executed. Slaves had a reputation as recalcitrant (38). In this aspect, Jacobs says Never witnessed such scenes can hardly believe what I know was inflicted at this time on innocent men, women and children against whom there was not the slightest ground for suspicion-colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered in an especial manner.

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