

LITERARY AWAKENING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Lucy Terry is considered as the first African American writer who has written the ballad "Bars Fight" in 1746. The ballad was first published in 1854. After that African born and Boston raised Phillis Wheatley is considered as African American writer, written poems on various subjects in refined manner. She died at the age of thirty and her work titled Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral was published in 1773 in the United States. There was an intellectual, social, and artistic explosion that spanned from about 1818 until the mid-1930s. During the Harlem Renaissance, major prominent African American writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling A. Brown formulated methods for writing about black experience. Three key factors motivate the development of the Black Arts Movement; these are perception, experience, and preservation.

Key words: *Literary awakening, Harlem Renaissance, jazz music, Black Arts Movement*

Study shows that Lucy Terry is considered as the first African American writer who has written the ballad "Bars Fight" in 1746. The ballad was first published in 1854. After that the poet Phillis Wheatley has published her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773. Wheatley was born in Senegal. She was captured and sold into slavery at the age of seven. She was brought to Massachusetts and owned by a Boston merchant. She had mastered her new language of English by the time she was 16 and has written poems on various subjects. American Revolution fighter George Washington thanked Wheatley for writing a poem in his honor. However, some whites found it hard to believe that a black woman could write such a refined poetry.

Since their entry into the United States of America, African American writers have been contributing scholarly work to the literature to show forth their literary talent. They competed with the white people and proved that they are also equally talented with the white in the field of literature. Major prominent African American writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling A. Brown formulated methods for writing about black experience (introduction 2). Writings of African Americans demonstrate the importance of Renaissance themes for non-black writers who were, in various ways, attracted to ideas and images important during the period of the "New Negro." Eugene O'Neil, Carl Van Vechten, and Du Bose Heyward each contributed a basic impetus to the Renaissance. Black writers in the twenties created their work clearly within an atmosphere which was to some degree created by others at the edge of the fact that one should call the Renaissance. Research reveals that it has been argued that the Renaissance was short-lived and without much effect, but it has been much more convincingly demonstrated that what the major black thinkers and writers accomplished in the twenties was absorbed not only in America, but in Africa by young writers like Leopold Senghor, Mercer Cook, and their works are published in the work, *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and in the United States* (Madison 1969).

W. E. B. Du Bois has played a major role to motivate many African American writers to write well on various themes and to write down artistically. He used literature as a vehicle for enunciating and effecting social, political, and economic ideas. Therefore, he sketched literary theory rather than

constructing it with the total concentration characteristic of one whose major concern is the art itself. Moreover, like other theorists, he sometimes experienced difficulty with the practical applications of his theories. Darwin T. Turner, in his article "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic" states that unlike Wordsworth or T.S. Eliot, Du Bois never created in his fiction, drama, and poetry the great work which would both illustrate and justify his literary theory. Despite whatever weakness he may have revealed in definition or application, there is value in examining his theory of black art, not only because it was of extreme importance to his efforts to create a strong and respected black population during the Harlem Renaissance, a significant moment in the development of literature by Afro-Americans (A. Kramer 11). The critical study reveals that there is a relation between Du Bois theories and the work of black writers of the Renaissance. Du Bois had worked for many years as editor of the journal named *The Crisis* to promote literary activity and to foster racial pride through literature. He admonished Negroes to accept artistic presentations of the truth of Negro life. The critical study shows that the uniqueness of Afro-American artistic expression has been revealed and discovered in new music, new rhythm, new melody and poignant, even terrible, expressions of joy, sorrow, and despair. In his article "Criteria for Negro Art" he states that "we are so used to seeing the truth distorted to our despite, that whenever we are portrayed on canvas, in story or on the stage, as simple humans with human frailties, we rebel. We want everything said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our art and propaganda be one (12)." Some white writers, in their writing highlight black criminals and prostitutes and that way they diminish the image of black people. They try to exaggerate evil in Negroes. Du Bois insists that the black writers should focus the truth and show forth to the society that the black people are good human beings and suffered disgrace by the white people since their arrival into various foreign lands as slaves. He urges that blacks could make a distinctive contribution to American drama by interpreting black subjects positively. He opines that the black people need more leisure and detachment to express their ideas creatively and produce noteworthy works in the field of literature. He further states that serious black writers are emerging despite their lack of leisure. He praised some white writers like Henry O. Tanner, Charles W. Chesnutt, and William Stanley and opines that they are great writers. However, he denied that they had contributed significantly to American Negro art.

Research reveals that American Negro art is built on the sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery, on the difficulties that sprang from Emancipation, on the feelings of revenge, despair, aspirations, and hatred which arose as the Negroes struggled and fought their way upward (A. Kramer 53). Sherwood Anderson states that he had lived among Negro laborers, whom he had found to be sweetest people he knew. Negroes are worrying too much and being too sensitive; they have no more reason to complain about their portraits in literature than whites would have (A. Kramer 22). A significant number of white people have close association with the black people and show sympathy towards them knowing the fact they have gone through the darkest phase of oppression in the past and still suffer discrimination by the white folk. Research discloses that the end of the Civil War and Emancipation did not help end the racist oppression of African Americans in the United States of America, rather their exploitation simply assumed other forms (Smith, introduction XIV). However, today a black arts movement exists; and, many black writers and educators are seriously defining the dimensions of a black aesthetic. When one considers the work of some self-identified black arts dramatists and poets who picture only the voice, squalor, contemptibility, and failure of black communities. The Harlem Renaissance caused many white writers to have close association with the black people. The white writers appreciated the talent of the black people. The most significant result of the Negro vogue was the encouragement that black musicians, writers, and other artists received from white audiences and important white individuals. Jazz and blues thrived and defined the mood of the period. But it is the literature that we see the most impressive results of this new and open mood. There were more books published by blacks in the twenties than ever before and it would not be until the sixties that African American literary activity would again exhibit equal or greater vitality. The

collective literary product of the period is indicated today by the term "Harlem Renaissance" or "Negro Renaissance." The young writers of the period were guided and encouraged not only by their black seniors but also by many sympathetic whites (A. Kramer 33-34). The Harlem Renaissance appeared on the American scene during the closing years of World War I, was publicly recognized by men such as Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson in 1924 and had begun declining about the time of the stock market crash in 1929. While the African American creative writing of this brief period failed to achieve their potential as writers and did not fully grapple with the implications of Alain Locke's elaborate effort to develop a conscious 'local color' movement of Afro-American arts. By the mid-thirties, exotic and genteel novels were no longer popular with the publishers and were attacked by a new breed of black writers and critics. "In 1940, Langston Hughes spoke for many when he said, 'I had a swell time while it (the Negro Renaissance) lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long... for how could a larger number of people be crazy about Negroes forever?'" (A. Kramer 34). However, the white writer, Carl Van Vechten's work *Nigger Heaven* about Negroes increased the image of black writers. Described by a contemporary as an 'archeologist of the exotic,' Carl Van Vechten was interested in the Negro long before he published *Nigger Heaven*. He was among the first to take jazz seriously as an art form and had become interested in the Negro by way of jazz and Gertrude Stein. He promoted interracial gatherings by entertaining blacks at his home. During the early twenties, he came to know many black writers and leaders such as Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Rudolph Fisher, and Eric Walrond. Soon he was a regular visitor in Harlem, and according to Ethel Waters, came to know more about New York's black belt than any other white person with the exception of the captain of Harlem's police station (35). He was in fact their major contact with white journals and white publishers. He was also responsible for many contacts between the white and the black artists. Through his interracial parties and gatherings in Harlem and in the Village, he made it smart to be interracial. Van Vechten was instrumental in getting Langston Hughes first two volumes of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to a Jew* (1927), accepted for publication by Alfred Knopf. Through Van Vechten, Hughes found his way to the pages of *Vanity Fair*. He also persuaded Alfred Knopf to publish James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, Rudolf Fisher, and Chester Himes.

Study reveals that more white writers in the South as well as the North wrote about the Negro and sheer quantity the record remains unmatched to this day. One group of writers and intellectuals, centered at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, devoted their careers almost entirely to Negro-related writing. Known generally as writers of the Southern Renaissance, the group included Paul Green, Julia Peterkin, Du Bose Heyward, T.S. Stribling, Elizabeth Lay Green, and Edward Sheldon (33). Friederich Koch, the director of the University's little theater group, the Carolina playmakers, and former student of George Pierce Baker, particularly encouraged plays that made an artistic use of Negro themes.

Research shows that there was the world created by the plantation tradition, especially by the dialect poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, which had appeared originally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and had been reprinted, subsequently, in special editions, sometimes lavishly illustrated. This was a black South full of memories of good times on the old plantation, demonstrations of the efficacy of Christian piety, and antics of collapsible, indestructible comedians in blackface. What is referred to here is the popular impression of Dunbar's verse, reinforced by faithful and frequent recitation by blacks and whites all over America. A study of the whole Dunbar canon reveals a troubled poet deeply sensitive especially to the materialist and mechanistic thought at the turn of the century. But Dunbar's South, for most Americans, was not to be distinguished from that projected by the minstrel stage and created nostalgically in sentimental fiction. By 1920 blacks had ceased to take it seriously, if they ever had, except for those enterprising artists who sought to extract from it profitable theatrical or musical formulas. A second South was linked to the name of Booker Washington, who offered it to the world on the page of *Up From Slavery* (1901). These presented a picture of improving relations involving blacks and whites and an

improving economic status for blacks. Patience, Christian virtue, and hard work would result in prosperity soon; but civil rights, the vote, and full citizenship would take longer. Survival demanded the compromise of manhood, perhaps, but Washington had the social Darwinist's South was real enough, but 1920 it had lost credibility with most black intellectuals. His reality seemed to be restricted to those oases in the South that tended to justify his convictions. Meanwhile, the masses of blacks in the South lived poor, desperate lives unleavened by the force of Booker's rhetoric.

Critical study shows that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, African-American poets, literary critics, and theorists produced a large body of works which reflected the spirit of Black Power self-determination and African-American expressive culture. Two seminal books *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968) and *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) were published which included the work of creative artists and intellectuals who committed themselves to producing artistic and cultural works to black audiences (Daina Miniotaitė 28).

Jazz music is a creation by African Americans. It is one of the musical forms that Chicago, among other cities, founded in the early twentieth century, developed during the period of the Chicago Renaissance as aesthetic substructure of African American literature. Keith D. Leonard states that the literary traits of Jazz, such as cultural hybridity, thematic complexity, and discursive improvisation, in works by Hughes and Ralph Ellison and by many other African American artists. The literary works attest to the musical inference between, on the one hand, the rhythms of dissident African cultures and, on the other, the harmonies and instrumentation of imperial European cultures. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was another renaissance that admired the aesthetic and performative intersections of literature and music. But whereas the New Negro Chicago Renaissance openly acknowledged the interracial or intercultural hybridity of African American literary forms, the proponents of the Black Arts Movement, including Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Haki Madhubuti, and Nikki Giovanni, insisted that black political power, racial pride, and cultural authenticity exist independent of the mainstream, predominantly white, influences of North America and Europe. The Black Arts and Civil Rights Movement helped crystallize the cultural and political terms in which African American writers defined themselves and the experiences of others within their racial or ethnic communities (1758).

African Americans writing during and in wake of these movements, however, also may have tussled with the cultural and political implications of reading and writing the past, the present, and the future. According to Glenda R. Carpio, humorous forms, such as satire, parody, tragicomedy and 'signifying, have long been crucial to the ways that African American writers depicted their communities while critiquing racism. Contemporary writers like Ishmael Reed, Charles Johnson, Suzan Lori Parks, Colson Whitehead, and Paul Beatty, have misused the ability of humor, to unsettle the assumptions of race and racism that have hamstrung discourses of African American identity and humanity. For Madhu Dubey, the neo-slave narrative, a genre of literature about slavery and freedom emerging especially since the 1970s, and feathering the likes of Reed, Johnson, and Sherley Anne Williams, among others, is another strategy by which contemporary African American writers have elucidated the history of racial political struggle. Some African American women writers have developed a special genre of popular fiction that likewise enables them to realize the history of racial political struggle. The genre also helps the authors record the persistence, permutations, and complications of this struggle in the Post-Civil Rights era, in terms of such topics as urban development, suburban migration, upward socioeconomic mobility, academic education, business professionalization, and romantic relationships within African American communities. For Jeffery Allen Tucker, Science fiction has become a form by which certain African American writers, Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, above all, have overcome the monopolistic representations of human experience in African American canons and literary traditions. The writers have designed alternative representations of racial humanity and non-human species; global territoriality and

cosmic extra-territoriality; temporality and a-temporality- indeed, representations that disrupt our prominent categories of identity, including but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, culture and class(2013). Shaila Mehra in her work, *Reading the Past: History and the African American Postmodern* states that the Black Arts Movement served to articulate the value that black culture can be the source of affirmative racial identity for the self and the group. Three key factors motivate the development of both the Black Arts Movement as a loosely conjoined series of artistic renaissances in specific urban American locations, and the development of the Black Aesthetic as a theory of black expressive and artistic culture. These are perception, experience, and preservation.

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