

The African American Journey to the Power Dome

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Wright, Ellison, Baldwin

By

Bhumika Sharma

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*Dedicated to
my affectionate mother-in-law,
the late Mrs. Nirmala Sharma*

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PREFACE

Black Americans have traveled a long way in their cultural transformation from the 'Negro' to the 'African American.' Ever since their arrival in the 'Promised Land' of America, they have passed through various upheavals. Their socio-economic and political status has undergone profound changes; and with these changes, the nature of racial relations, character, and culture of the Afro-Americans has also evolved, adapted, and metamorphosed. African American fiction beautifully mirrors this black odyssey in an artistic frame. It emerges out of and is designed by the socio-economic, political, and psychic double consciousness of the African American artist, who stands amidst a cultural vortex. Being an integral part of the community, he could not resist the emotional and intellectual churning that takes place in the process. It makes the African American writer attentive to the prevalent condition. He is persuaded to follow what is brought forth by his consciousness; and he also wishes to determine his active socio-political role. At the same time, these stirrings enable him to produce an artistic account of the African American collective experience as viewed in its broad spectrum.

While placed in the historical context of the first encounter between Africa and America, the story of the black begins with the practice of human chattel enslavement in 1619 and then the continuation of slavery as a legal institution for more than 200 years in America. The African American tale appears a long journey of continuous amelioration from subjugation to sublimation. Living on the fringe of the society, the black man finds himself historically uprooted, economically exploited, socially segregated, and psychologically wounded. His conscious as well as his subconscious mind stores this historical experience as an indelible impression that shapes his psycho-cerebral makeup. It creates certain discernible patterns in the African American literary writings that go in parallel with the matter-of-fact historical and political documentation of their struggle. Generally, the presence of these patterns in literature is viewed abstractly and is often interpreted either through any of the preferred critical theories or in purely sociological terms. But, Black fiction is not merely the reactionary literature of embittered minds. It condenses universal human emotions combined with real-life experiences that generate a range of creative thoughts in its gradual formation.

Interestingly, despite being initiated as an overture to capture the specific group's conscious response to the collectively experienced reality, African American writing is not bound with its ethnic origin. Nor does it remain fixed in any given frame of assessment. On the contrary, it proves dynamic and multi-dimensional in its artistic rendering— and, in due course of development, perfectly matches with the fluidity of the black man's socio-political and historical consciousness.

The present book is an endeavor to redefine the African American literary experience in the context of concrete socio-political facts and historically altered realities, which surface with the advancement of time. It elaborates upon how these factors not only affect the African American literary output but also go hand-in-hand with the black American writers' ever-growing artistic consciousness. The African American writer, as an infallible artist, creates a parallel world of symbolic signification and metaphorical representation. His fictional firmament encompasses the wide range of the black American experience— re-created within the artistic contour of a literary form. In fact, as a creative overture, it surpasses the ethnic boundaries and predetermined structural outlines. While facilitating a free play of fact and fiction, it indeed presents a curious juxtaposition of social reality and art.

The idea for the book germinated from my research endeavor a few years back when I set off to explore the rich repository of African American fiction. Given the wide range of Black American writing, it was, indeed a difficult choice to make. Out of the litany of Black American writers, it was difficult to choose which ones ought to be the prime focus of such a study, given that this study attempts to capture the ever-changing but closely connected patterns of the corresponding collective black experience. And to make the choice more challenging, I had the vast canvas of African American fiction present before me. There were numerous authors; and their wonderful writings were marked by a diversity of subjects and a variety of literary styles. Since I intended to capture the modern stint and explicate how the African American writing had ushered into a new phase of development at the turn of the century, I decided to pick out the writers who best represent the African American sentiments and their major ideological engagements in the modern period. My quest ended up with the three renowned names, whose fiction, despite being explored, I discovered, was not much seen in its wholesomeness of the emotional and ideological historicity. Hence, I made a deliberate selection conducive to my objective of the close examination of the African American odyssey with special reference to the three most

illustrative of the black American writers— Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin.

With regard to the American literary history, these writers come out as three of the major representative authors of the African American experience. I have dwelled on the fictional world of these authors for investigating the progressive march of the black man in a world of opportunities. This world is the same 'Promised Land' writ large with the magical color of the 'American Dream' realized by the great American fictional heroes like Jay Gatsby.

Surprisingly, contrary to the most democratic of the American expectations, the fictional world construed by Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin is a different place. One witnesses an ambivalent world, set between the hope of 'Daydreams' and disappointment of 'Nightmares' experienced by the black man in his strive to embrace generosity and affluence of the American culture. It is evident in a number of illustrative re-constructions of the characteristic celebration of the American dream. Whether it is the two-generation quest undertaken by the father and the son respectively in Wright's *The Long Dream* or the soaring aspirations of Ellison's vagabond hero in the novel *Invisible Man* or the refurbishment of the same old American success story of Leo Proudhammer in Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*, it surfaces vividly. Being situated amidst the hostile reality of the larger socio-political domain, the black man opts to engage with the very idea of the American dream play. Revealing both the charm and frustration of the lived intersection, the black protagonists of these authors appear struggling for a way out. They have to either fully realize or outwardly reject the fantasy of the 'American Dream.' Hence, waging a battle against the hostile circumstances, the African American dares to dream. He clings to the possibility of its accomplishment. Perhaps, within the existent American world, at some historical juncture, there awaits the promised land of the Black American dreams.

There exists an extensive critical overview of the fiction of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin but the novels of these authors have been chiefly interpreted by the critics in isolation to figure out the racial undertone of the texts. No major study has ever treated their fictional output as a collective configuration of the black *compos mentis*. In view of the observed gap, I decided to review the novels of these three African American stalwarts over the temporal framework. My overture aimed to reveal the growth of the black man in emotional and ideological terms. Hence, providing an aperture for the renewed examination of African American fiction, the book projects a linear progression of the human

sensibilities along with the advancement of time. It is an attempt to bring out the undercurrent of subtle progression adroitly represented in the African American fiction in general and the novels of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin in particular.

The book captures the historiographic configuration embedded in the artistic delineation of a lived experience. It represents what it means to be a 'black' in America. It raises many questions. The black man has always been there; however, does he 'really' exist and, furthermore, 'where' does he exist? Is it in reality or imagination? Has there been a change in the status since his arrival on the plantation, if yes, what has it been? How should the transformation of the African American be perceived? Can their advancement be viewed in terms of a gradual shift from 'Africanness' to 'Americanness' or vice versa? How does their cultural metamorphosis enable them to undergo the identity formation ranging from the labeled 'primitive brute' to the 'civilized' citizen of a cosmopolitan society? In fact, many internal and external elements partake in the making of a cultural 'hybrid' appropriately christened as the 'African American.' It is not only their biological change from the Negro to a mulatto, to a quadroon, to an octoroon but also an emotional and ideological ordeal, which ultimately culminates in assuming a unique identity on their part as the Black American. The book aims to comprehend how the socio-political, economic, and psychic realities present in the society shape the human mindset. How the black authorship acquires a distinct form in terms of the mainstream American literature, and how it helps the African Americans to discover many psycho cerebral truths interspersed in their collective consciousness.

The scope of the book lies in providing a general overview of the African American literary history, which is enhanced by navigating the fictional world of the selected authors thoroughly. The fictional works by these writers trace the African American journey from the plantation to the power dome. In the course of such exploration, the book addresses many vital issues about the socio-political engagements of these African American writers. It assesses the thematic engagements as well as the narrative art of the writers to view them in the wholesomeness of their artistic overture. It reveals that what makes their contribution to African American authorship significant is the projection of black consciousness in the broad human context. Despite being originated in social realism, their fiction is not bound by the mere social argument as observed by various critics. It also epitomizes the culmination of literary art.

The book is divided into five chapters followed by the conclusion. Chapter I *Black Authorship: Socio-Historical Perspectives* overviews the

gradual progress of the African American literary tradition. It focuses on the socio-political background of the African American history and shifting literary perspectives of the black authorship. With the historical development of the Negro slave into an emancipated American citizen, African American fictional writing has also undergone a significant metamorphosis. It manifests how the black artist has always been aware of the prevailing socio-political and economic realities of the times and has tried to provide space for the muffled voice of the dispossessed. The tremendous progression and dynamism, witnessed in the artistic treatment of 'black sensibilities' from *The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life* by William Wells Brown to the Harlem Renaissance novels, to the black arts movement, and later in the contemporary black feminist writing, show the African American quest for an identity and human dignity.

Chapter II *Richard Wright: A Voice of Protest* encompasses the study of emerging emotional and ideological patterns in the created dramatic situations, subtly fabricated by Richard Wright in his fictional world. It examines the all-prevalent anxiety, tension and various stresses experienced by Wright's aggressive black protagonists. Wright's black anti-hero, despite his altering socio-political, ethical, moral, and academic status, recurs with the same force of aggression in each of his succeeding novels. It shows how the oppressed black oscillates between violence and orderliness for his emotional survival. The analysis also captures the author's thought patterns regarding various driving forces and ideological drifts at different stages of progression in the African American historical stride.

Chapter III *Ralph Ellison: An Epitome of Equilibrium* is a close study of the great African American artist Ralph Ellison. Projecting the multidimensional character of his two masterpieces *Invisible Man* and *Juneteenth*, this chapter explicates the perspicuous structural patterns artistically woven by the novelist. It brings out how the author uses his fiction to comprehend and comment on the society and makes his characters the spokespersons of particular viewpoints. Ellison's black protagonist grows in the process of learning. He, depending upon the level of his emotional and intellectual maturity at that point of time, revolts as well as adjusts with the existing social set up, howsoever dissatisfying and defective it may appear. The 'equanimity' of Ellison's fictional craft finely blends the element of protest with art.

Chapter IV *James Baldwin: From Chaos to Cosmos*¹ focuses on the socio-economic-political and psychic double consciousness of the black American, utilized by James Baldwin in his novels. The author minutely

anatomizes sex, family, and religion to understand the making of the black consciousness. It explores the author's racial and gender sensibilities and articulates the African American emotional and ideological standpoints about the prevailing integrational and disintegrational tendencies. The emotionally charged responses to the existing circumstances lead Baldwin's black protagonists to a dilemma that finally resolves through their liberation from the racial and gender constructions.

Chapter V *African American Stalwarts and the Art of Narration* comprises the study of aesthetic aspects, narrative art, and other artistic dimensions of the literary trio, namely Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. It examines their novels in the light of fictional techniques and stylistic features used by them. The prevalent methods of plot construction, characterization, and art of narration have been taken into consideration. While addressing the stylistic elements of their narrative technique, the analysis also brings in the dialectics projected through the dialogues, which indeed proves the artistic excellence of their writings.

The last section of the book titled *The Final Destination* tries to reveal the socio-artistic significance of the fictional works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin in corollary. The concluding chapter, providing space for a comparative study, discusses the strengths and drawbacks of all the three and divulges some critical viewpoints. The section sums up the observed patterns in their novels and establishes how these projections become instrumental in articulating the African American emotional and ideological stances in the course of their historical odyssey.

In a nutshell, the book brings forth the continuous progression of human sensibilities and emotional maturity witnessed in the fictional journey of the black man. It accomplishes the task through a close examination of the novels penned down by the African American authors with special reference to Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin. The critical inquiry pursued throughout highlights how the historicity concerning the transformation of the stereotypical 'nativity' of the American black into the cultural 'sophistication' of Americanness is metaphorically reflected in the character of many black protagonists. The Black American heroes imbibe certain emotional and ideological traits drawn from the collective African American consciousness. Certainly, art closely relates to life, and the book highlights the same interposition. It forms a vitrine to view African American fiction not only in its theoretical implications but also in the overall socio-artistic dimensions. It also unravels the abstract 'poetics' of the black fiction that surprisingly sprung from the ineluctable concreteness of the African American encounter with the stark human

realities. In fact, as a creative overture, it surpasses the ethnic boundaries and framed outlines for the free play of fact and fiction that mingles the social reality with the genius of literary art.

Bhumika Sharma

Note

¹ Part of this Chapter was originally published with Springer as an article “Baldwin’s Quest for Panacea: A Case Study” in the *Journal of African American Studies* (2013) Volume 17, Number 4. Pg. 518-528.

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It is true that an abstract idea takes concrete shape by the author's putting a lot of effort into creating a piece of writing. However, its formation is also accomplished with the blessings of well-wishers—whose valuable support may enable an aspirant to accomplish a mighty task. I, too, began my book apprehensively—wondering how it would reach its culmination. But thanks to many fine scholars and dear friends, all of whom always encouraged me and helped me in materializing my idea into reality. I express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Tanuja Mathur (English Department Head at the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur), whose guidance made possible my doctoral work which structurally serves as the foundation of the present book. I am especially indebted to my mentor, the late Dr. G. D. Paliwal (former Director of Stani Memorial P. G. College, Jaipur) for having shared his wisdom and expertise with me. Discussions held with him gave me an insight into understanding the subtle shades of ingeniously woven motifs in African American narratives. I also express my gratitude to *The American Library*, New Delhi, for providing much-needed print and web resources – and, of course, to the Cambridge Scholars Publishing team including Ms. Victoria Carruthers and Ms. Hannah Fletcher for their endeavors. A special thanks goes to Ivan Veller, who not only proofread the entire manuscript brilliantly but also shared valuable views that helped me comprehend the linguistic and cultural nuances of certain American practices.

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Bhumika Sharma

CHAPTER I

BLACK AUTHORSHIP: SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the sphere of creative writing, a consistent struggle against the social inequality, exploitation, oppression, and malpractices earmarks the art as a vehicle for social change. It has always been a synonym of literary vigor that culminates in artistic excellence and enriches overall aesthetics. It has been a frequent human practice at the emotional and intellectual level. The power of the word has been witnessed almost in every age and holds true in the present context, too. The exhibition of creative energy arouses a universal consciousness that results in the articulation of deep human sensibility and a sympathetic understanding of the oppressed class. Literary art becomes instrumental in measuring the depth of human trauma.

Evolving along a considerably long stretch of time, this tradition – which centers on the fundamental disposition of injustice, agony, and protest – has acquired dynamism. Its omnipresence is reflected in one or the other form in the vast entity of literature. It evinces the natural instinct of repulsion- and exhibits whatever unbearable burdens weigh down the human heart from blood to ink. The socio-literary history of the world is full of such manifestations in which wars were waged at various points in time through meaningful experiments with ‘words.’ Literature has always been a projection as well as a reflection; a means as well as an end for such noble struggles. Such literature can be termed the creative expostulation of human thoughts and emotions.

In the present age of postmodernism and poststructuralism, the conception of minority literature has become a vast intellectual and cultural movement. It encompasses the expression of every dispossessed class – whether it is Feminism, or Marxism, or a counter-attack to Casteism or Racism. These streams are mostly anti-establishment and aim to set up a classless and casteless system, which would be founded on the principle of social equality. The movement of Black authorship also belongs to this rebellious but rich literary tradition of emotional and intellectual outcry. The cult of Negro authorship, which is a sub-stream of

the American mainstream, might have sprouted in a particular region but has a universal appeal that consists in its involvement with the fundamental instinct of emotional and ideological protest against the negation of human dignity. It would have initiated with the first Negro literary attempt, notwithstanding its immaturity and alleged less artistic nature, in which the feelings and thoughts of suppressed blacks were given voice. In the course of time, it was watered and nurtured by many such attempts on the part not only of the blacks but also of various white writers. Their endeavors aimed to make the voice of the dispossessed louder and sharper—which ultimately succeeded in making it audible.

Suppression accumulates force, which ultimately finds an outlet somewhere and somehow in strong resistance. And when this emotional and intellectual energy erupts, its momentum proves irresistible. It engulfs whatever comes in its way and carries everything along its current. Since a current allows for forming and deforming, shaping and re-shaping, blending and segregating, and also molding and adapting, the floating object is transformed in the process. The socio-artistic history of Black authorship presents a paradigm of such constructive as well as deconstructive formations.

African American authorship, as the name indicates, is inseparably associated with American culture in which American identity is defined as a complex whole. It comprises many surprising truths at various strata. The most democratic country in the world is ruled and shaped by the most undemocratic and unethical practice of racial discrimination. American psyche can neither be explored nor comprehended without understanding the race relations that exist at the very foundation of the social edifice of America. It is integrally woven into its cultural fabric. Hence, if the composite character of the ethnic literary output is to be understood, it is essential to probe into the race relations in American society.

In the course of its development, American history has passed through many milestones. The first landmark was the great Revolutionary War of America (1775-83), which resulted in the emergence of the United States of America. Even at its nascent stage, when a new democratic country was born, a grim undemocratic reality took shape within it. To quote E. Frazier Franklin, "At the time of the first census held in 1790, the Black population constituted one-fifth of the nation. About 8% of the Negroes were free, and 92% were slaves." (8)

The American war of liberation had succeeded in putting to an end the colonial rule of England and winning freedom for a significant part of the American populace – yet it did not bring any change in the socio-economic status of the black population. Black slaves were still slaves—

fraudulently deceived; more confined; oppressed; and inhumanly exploited. Since it is a natural law that human soul cannot be crushed interminably, the ceaseless suppression and elongated dispossession of the black slaves sprouted in the form of engulfing discontent. The issue of slavery became the most disruptive issue in the 19th century. Years of enduring humiliation, exploitation, oppression, and mental torture – endurance which had given courage to the black man, empowering him to speak – finally compelled the white liberal to listen to him.

As passions rose, the issue of slavery overshadowed all other problems and ultimately culminated in the onset of the Civil War in 1861. The American Civil War continued for almost five years and finally resulted in the end of American slavery and the simultaneous rise of the Northern industrial power. The Negro fought bravely supporting the union cause as declared by Lincoln Presidency and finally won Emancipation. It was followed by the period of reconstruction, which, subsequently, enunciated the era of progressive constitutional reforms. The 13th amendment to the constitution gave 'liberty' to the Negroes; the 14th amendment granted them 'citizenship,' and the 15th guaranteed them 'an equal right to vote.' Although the ensuing era bestowed the reward of political participation upon the Negroes, they remained economically dependent on their ex-slave owners. The capitalism of the North opened their eyes to the alternative prospect of seeking fortune in urban areas; still, to their dismay, the position of the Negroes remained that of subordination. They entered into the new capitalistic system – a system that was predominantly white (a demographic trait which added to their dismay). Besides this, the emergence of notorious organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the original form of race relations, popularly known as 'Jim Crow ethics,' aggravated their plight and intensified the darkness of their already grim life.

Given the rapidly changing socio-political and economic scenario, the shift in general human disposition was evident. How could the world of art remain mute? African American literature corresponded to these changes. With a deep insight, their fiction set out to articulate the historical ordeals of Black Americans. On the one hand, it projected the graphic images of the Negro predicament; on the other hand, it gave voice to the emotional and intellectual stirring of the Black Americans. In fact, it served as an outlet for their psychological experiences.

A true writer always participates in the struggle of the dispossessed. The creative faculty of an artist enables him to delineate the judicious wars in dynamic countenance. His commitment to the noble cause reflects his strivings honestly in writing. Certainly, the voice of a true artist contains

the fire of protest. It becomes as bitter and sharp as the experienced truths are. Black authorship also participated in the historical struggle of the Black Americans, contributing to the artistic projection of the African American journey from rags to riches in their real life. It succeeded in stimulating it with the first-hand experiences, deeply felt agony, gradually evolving rebellion, and growing sensibility.

The journey of Afro Americans began with the historical encounter between the two distinctly defined races, which had been destined to inherit the single identity of being American. Multitudinous fibers in their separate cultural set-ups were gradually woven in a single pattern. As the complex racial structure could neither exist nor be understood in absolute terms, the identity of one was always defined in relation to the other. At every stage of the historical development, these two different races were inescapably interrelated and closely associated with each other. Perhaps this was the reason that the first literary assault on the inhuman and immoral nature of American slavery was made, unexpectedly, by the white lady Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. The novel was a vehement attack on the slavery and was regarded as the greatest fictional success of the 19th century. Its theme was that slavery and Christianity could not coexist. The plot was woven around the Black protagonist, Uncle Tom, the slave, who served on Mr. Shelly's plantation. The novel projects a realistic and horrible picture of the tragic fate of black slaves on the Southern plantations. In this novel, Uncle Tom may appear to be just the titular hero – but it was his inner strength, undoubting courage, goodness of spirit, and nobility of soul that touched the core of humanity. It won the heart of the contemporary white middle class and put a question mark on the false justifications for the inhuman and immoral institution of American slavery. The novel also hints – through the escape of the slave family of George, Elizabeth, and their son Harry – that if given a chance, black people can prove their worth. What they need is just to be educated, nurtured, and groomed properly. If facilitated with the required resources, the Black race can also turn over a new leaf in life.

The publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provided an opportunity to the petty Southern white writers to write novels in justification of slavery. Some authors like William Gilmore Simms and John P. Kennedy wrote proslavery novels to raise their voices against those of other whites, and especially against the Northern white liberalistic attitude. It was, in fact, the mid-19th century that witnessed the initiation of Black authorship. William Wells Brown could be regarded as the first Black novelist who initiated the new era of Black creativity. It gradually evolved and mellowed overtime and scaled great heights in terms of artistic excellence.

Brown's novel was entitled, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life*, which was published in London in 1853 – a year after the publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Clotel* was based on the theme of miscegenation, a wide-spread phenomenon of the Southern plantation life. Later, the novel was published with the revised title *Clotel: A Tale of Southern States*. Brown was drawn to the “sensational subjects on the Southern plantation” and also discussed social complication arising from the mixture of races in the South” (Loggins Vernon, 164). In spite of its sensational plot, the book failed to achieve the immense popularity that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* enjoyed. Still, in its realism, *Clotel* is decidedly a franker portrayal of the Negro life than is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The other leading Black novelists of this period – viz. Frank J. Webb (*The Garries and Their Friends*, 1857) and Martin R. Delany (*Blake; or the Huts of America*, 1859-1861) – also delineated slavery in their writings. But unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe, who treated it as an essentially immoral institution, they treated it as a system of exploitation. The focus shifted from the ethical to the socio-economic aspects of black life.

The works of this period deal with the slavery of the Negro and have a quite simple structure—consisting of the tale of separation of the man and wife; the sale of a mother and her children; their subsequent fate; a catalogue of the evils of slavery; the runaway slaves; their hot chase by the slave owners; etc. The plots of these novels are at once sentimental and realistic. Black novelists of the period sought inspiration from Mrs. Stowe; but instead of penning the sentimental novels, they wrote more realistic novels. The fiction of this period records contemporary social history that consists of widespread miscegenation in the old South and the emergence of a spirit of discontent and revolt amongst the Negroes.

The period spanning from the beginning of the civil war to the last decade of the 19th century (i.e., 1860-1890) does not exhibit much creativity on the part of Black artists. The civil war resulted in the emancipation of Blacks – but it also brought new responsibilities, subsequent uncertainties, chaos, and new requisitions. A re-adjustment of the status of the Black in American society was earnestly required. It needed a real endeavor on the part of both the Blacks and the Whites to integrate constructively. However, redefining the role of the two contrastingly patterned races (interwoven in the name of Cosmopolitan American culture) was not so smooth and easy. Blacks confronted the harsh actualities of their new, emancipated life. Realities of the predominantly prejudiced white world were eye-openers for them. In fact, Black creativity found itself standing amidst confusion—facing the aforementioned dilemma about its future course. The outstanding questions were: “Now, what?” “What to do?”

“Where to go?” “Which course needs to be taken?” It was the phase of the ‘Black impasse’. Still, the Negro issue was a hot topic for discussion. Many white writers such as Thomas Nelson Page (*In Ole Virginia*, 1887; *Red Rock*, 1898), Joel Chandler Harris (*Nights with Uncle Remus*, 1883; *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, 1892), George W. Cable (*The Grandissimes*, 1880; *Madame Delphine*, 1881), Rebecca Davis (*Waiting for the Verdict*, 1868), and Albion W. Tourgee (*A Royal Gentleman*, 1881; *Hot Plough Shares*, 1883; *Pactolus Prime*, 1890) showed interest in it.

At this crucial historical juncture, while the Black reality was being portrayed through the white perspective, there appeared the great classic entitled *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In this novel, Mark Twain does not long for the good old plantation days but instead shows an intense desire for social justice and evinces an egalitarian attitude. In the persona of Huck and Jim, the author creates two immortal characters. From the start of the narrative, the unparalleled humanism of Twain exudes from his pen. His sincere sympathy for the fugitive slaves gradually permeates through the overall schema of the novel. Chapter 8 proclaims Huck’s promise not to reveal Jim’s secret, “even though people would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum” (38). The novel was an indication of liberal and more sympathetic handling of the black issue by the upcoming white authors.

In general, the novels of this period were chiefly a socio-economic study of the problem of Southern reconstruction. In their attempt to understand Negro life, these authors made a careful study of the Negro folklore and dialect. Use of the local dialect by Mark Twain and an invocation of the Negro folklore, animal fables, local manners, and local customs by Joel Chandler Harris and George W. Cable are instances of such practices followed by the contemporary writers of the period.

It was the White liberalism of Pre-World-War-I period (1890-1914) that greeted the 20th century with an enthusiastic spirit of abolitionism and attacked the prejudices and pseudo-supremacy of the white race. The Negroes, indeed, achieved freedom – but discrimination against them also increased side by side. The champions of white superiority fabricated the absurd philosophy of White racial supremacy, which is reflected in the novels of various authors like Thomas Dixon, who published *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and its sequels—*The Clan’s Man* (1905) and *The Traitor* (1907). Leadership of the Black activists, eventually, gave birth to the ‘New Negro,’ who differed in his dignity and manhood from the slave mindedness of the ‘Old Negro,’ who had earlier known his ‘place’ in the social strata. Contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of docile ‘Old Negro,’ this ‘New Negro’ was reactionary and, unquestionably, not resigned to the

previously subservient position which he had held. Some Negro writers of this period like Mrs. Francis E. W. Harper (*Iola Leroy*, 1893), Charles W. Chesnutt (*The House Behind the Cedars*, 1900; *The Marrow of Tradition*, 1901; *The Colonel's Dream*, 1905), Paul Lawrence Dunbar (*The Uncalled*, 1898; *The Love of Landry*, 1900; *The Fanatics*, 1901; *The Sports of the Gods*, 1902), and Sutton Griggs (*Imporium In Imperio*, 1899; *Pointing The Way*, 1908) stood somewhere between the concepts of the 'Old' and the 'New Negro.' The changing political scenario was also a major factor in transforming literary images of the Black in numerous fictional configurations.

The inception of the 20th century witnessed chiefly two streams in the Black leadership. The Great Conciliator, Booker T. Washington, suggested a new philosophy for the accommodation of two races. In his words, "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet, one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (Excerpts from the Atlanta Speech (1895) by Booker T. Washington). On the contrary, many young intellectual Negroes like W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson did not have faith in the principle of black accommodation. They completely differed from Washington in their approach. Theirs was militant at its core. They became instrumental in the formation of interracial organizations like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People) and the NUL (National Urban League). They published their own magazines such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Du Bois, a well-read scholar and a social realist, talked in real, pragmatic terms about the issues of his day. The poor white farmer of his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) becomes the mouthpiece of his socialistic ideology and spells out a solution for the currently distorted and strained race relations endemic to the social sphere: "I think, these white slaves and black slaves ought to get together." His words echo proletarian sentiments founded on the ideological belief of the author. He draws attention to the economic exploitation prevalent in the agrarian system. Racial conflict is replaced by class conflict. Race dilutes paving the way to formulate a broader political and economic approach.

Such an evolving consciousness facilitates the taking of different perspectives to investigate racial complications. One of the prominent Negro intellectuals, James W. Johnson, adds a new leaf in the literary account of Afro-Americans' quest for identity. His novel, titled *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912), is a record of a nearly white black man's experiences. It shows his earnest endeavor to remember who he is. He is the hero of an internal war; someone who wishes to pursue his own black culture. His tragic dilemma lies in his search for true identity.

He plans to become a black composer but is instead is led towards easily 'passing' in the white world on account of his fair complexion. As his patron advises him:

"My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes[,] a white man. Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle, of the black people of the United States?" (Johnson, *Autobiography*, 472)

Ultimately, having persistently striven to celebrate black heritage, the hero vanishes. After observing and facing many humiliations, he makes up his mind to live as a white man. His striving indicates an essential interlude in the Afro-American quest for self-identity. Undoubtedly, Johnson's novel projects the classic 'tragic mulatto' situation. Throughout the novel, the author exhibits a soft corner for the Bohemian life and seems to assert that "ragtime music and cake-walk" are the accomplishments of which the Black race should be proud of rather than ashamed of. What Johnson appears to state is that there are many ex-colored men in America who have passed through such a phase.

Hence, the two Black intellectuals Du Bois and James W. Johnson could be treated as the harbinger of the 20th-century fiction that later thrived in the Harlem School of Black Renaissance. The post-reconstruction period (1890-1914) was the era of a restoration of the white supremacy and the Northern indifference to the Negro. It was the period in which repression – and all sorts of terrorism such as lynching, systematic disfranchisement, and frightening tactics of Ku Klux Klan – took place. But, at the same time, it was also a period of growing consciousness of the Blacks, the beginning of their search for roots, a gradually evolving sense of self-esteem, and an intention to expostulate whatever undoes their attempt to live with dignity. This awakening found clear expression in the post-World War-I period.

The 1920's saw the flowering of black writing, art, music, and thought that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. The entry of the United States into World War I in 1917 had created a boom in American industry. As a result, many Blacks moved from the South to take jobs in the Northern industrial plants. Blacks remained in the large Northern cities, notably Chicago and New York. Harlem, a section of New York, became the cosmopolitan center of Black life. The intellectual circle of the Harlem School includes authors like Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and many more – authors whose writing aimed to define and review Black heritage; protect Blacks from oppression; and make other Americans aware of Black life.

This span inaugurated a new phase of Black authorship, advocating a more realistic portrayal of the Negro characters and a contiguous psychological interpretation of their predicament. Stereotyped delineations and conservative explanations of their misery were discouraged. In the Harlem School of writing, the 'Negro' grows more and more race conscious and rejects the conventional values. His socio-political outlook changes and he is pervaded with the new nationalistic reflex. The Black writers of this period brought a new vision in the literary analysis of the Black issue, by examining it from varied angles and investigating its several dimensions. They employed fiction as a medium of racial protest, wrote purposive novels, revealed psychological insight, and displayed an unfailing concern with realism.

The novels of Harlem writers reflect the Black awakening. Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) contains the Renaissance elements that heralded the new age. Waldo Frank, a white novelist, as quoted by Kathleen Pfeiffer in *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank*, states:

... this is the first book in more ways than one. It is a harbinger of the South's literary maturity: of its emergence from the obsession put upon its minds by the unending racial crisis... It marks the dawn of direct and unafraid creation. (Frank, "Forward," 170)

The novel consists of assorted stories; sketches and poetry interspersed with the novelette. It derives its unity, not from the development of its plot and characters but the author's thesis. It is about the search for roots and the penalties people suffer on account of being uprooted.

Similarly, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) introduces one of the familiar themes in Black fiction. It manifests a desire to discover or return to one's home. As in the case of Afro-Americans, the difficulty of feeling at home in America – combined with an ignorance of the historic home of black people – adds agony to the sense of loss and disorientation. Different Black characters react to this quirky situation differently; but most of the time, when they search for home, their experience is peculiarly chaotic and terrifying. McKay's trilogy *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo*, and *Banana Bottom* constitute a direct and severe confrontation with this issue.

The act of going home ought ordinarily to be an act of rediscovery, but the paradox is that, in black fiction, going home becomes an effort at escape from a cycle of punishment, the idea of home itself being unknown and utopian. (Rosenblatt, *Black Fiction*, 90)

The novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), written by another Harlem writer Langston Hughes, is a study of intra-racial discord, which stems from the generation gap. It is exhibited in a carrying over of – and, at the same time, a rejection of – the traditions. It combines marked class distinctions, varied value orientations, individual nature, and racial consciousness. The novel exemplifies the existent contradiction through the members of Aunt Hager's family, who represent three generations at a time. Moving in different directions, all of them strive to fulfill their aspirations. Each one has one's peculiar way of objecting to and reacting to a particular situation.

Another well-known Harlem writer, Countee Cullen, also chooses the setting of Harlem for his novel *One Way to Heaven* (1932). He shows a novel aspect of the Harlem life. Contrary to McKay's cabaret, pool rooms, gambling houses, prostitution houses, and amusement basements that are meant to serve as specimens of the primitivism and exoticism of the Negro culture, Cullen's Harlem is the world of the sophisticated intelligentsia and respectable church-going common folk. He concentrates on the theme of the Negro Church and the intellectual world of Harlem. The novel demonstrates that the sex and animalistic instincts are not the only aspects of the Negro Harlem life. The chief characters in his novel, Sam Lucas and Constantia Brandon, become the spokespersons of these two different streams of the Harlem world. These two rivulets represent the throbbing religious and intellectual nerves of Harlem.

Black women writers also contributed to the gradually evolving cultural flux. Miss Jessie Fauset, Dorothy West, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston are a few names to be reckoned with among the Harlem School of writing. These women authors opened a new avenue for the exploration of a black woman's psyche. They gave a true and faithful account of female sentiments. Their fiction divulges the innermost feelings prevalent in the society, which is characteristically marred by the racial prejudices. For instance, Nella Larson signifies the racial and gender complexity arising out of miscegenation. Her novels seem to show a deep concern with the problems of maladjustment in the Negro life. Chiefly set against the backdrop of a reputable Negro middle class, her novels explore the impulsive black reaction to it. Her novel *Quicksand* (1928) delineates the life of the essentially neurotic mulatto woman Helga Crane, whose personality becomes paradoxical due to the racial crosscurrents in her blood, inherited from her Danish mother and American Negro father. The infirmity of her nature makes her move from one place to another and from one decision to the other – a continuous switch-over. Du Bois, the

famous intellectual Black leader, comments on Larsen's *Quicksand* in the following words:

...the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt, and stands easily with Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924), in its subtle comprehension of the curious cross currents that swirl about the black American. (Du Bois, "Review," 202)

Passing (1929) is another novel penned down by her. It is also based on the complications and hazards which result from 'passing' for a white person. The prime concern in her writing is the study of psychological perspective. She explores the implications of intermarriages, mixed blood, and the 'passing' on of the cognizance of black women.

Like Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston was also a prominent Black woman writer of the 20th century. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) depicts a courageous attempt on the part of a black woman, at her own level, to break the circular pattern of the Black journey. The structural design of the novel signifies how Afro Americans, in their attempt for self-fulfillment, feel a sense of retardation. Brought back to the same point wherefrom they initiated their struggle against the oppressive forces, they feel disappointed. Janie, the protagonist of the novel, too endeavors to break free these social shackles – but is repeatedly held back from doing so. Her Nanny, a residue of the crumbling old generation, advises her:

"Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. May be it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de n[-]gger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks." (Hurston, *Eyes Watching God*, 16)

But Jennie, somewhere deep inside in her heart, is not convinced. She is young and rebellious in her spirit. Throughout the novel, the enormous effort made by Janie in order to feel human demonstrates how strong the opposition to her humanity truly is. The novel displays the author's deep insight into the realm of human sensibility and emotional upheavals – particularly, the instincts and aspirations of the female.

With the Harlem Renaissance, Black writing ushered into the phase which, in the course of time, gradually transformed into a distinctive and forceful movement of Afro-American authorship. The 20th century witnessed a plethora of Black masterpieces authored by various black artists, the list of which is exhaustive. The Harlem tradition – one that

celebrates (rather than conceals or compromises) the Black cultural identity – was carried forward by many Black artists—artists such as Herman Dreer (*The Immediate Jewel of His Soul*, 1919); Joshua Henry Jone (*By Sanction of Law*, 1924); Walter White (*The Fire in the Flint*, 1924 and *Flight*, 1926); Jessie Fauset (*There is Confusion*, 1924, *The China Berry Tree*, 1931, and *Comedy: American Style* 1933); Du Bois (*Dark Princess*, 1928); Wallace Thurman (*The Blacker the Berry*, 1929 and *Infants of the Spring*, 1932); George Schyler (*Black No More*, 1931); and several others. The Harlem Renaissance was a prominent landmark in the Afro American journey toward self-assertion – but certainly, it was not the final destination. The long-untrodden pathway had been waiting for a long time. It was just a beginning for them to track these hitherto unexplored passages. Many new chapters were yet to be recorded in the annals of African American history.

The emotional fervor of the Harlem period gradually subsided and finally died down in the disappointment of the Great Depression of the 1930's. The Negro intellectuals became more responsive than they had been earlier. They, in fact, turned into the leading representatives of the black masses. Their voice, pitched against the aggravating conditions of the Black populace as vigorously as it could, demonstrated the urgency of change in a way which had not been seen earlier. Furthermore, its accentuation altered to a more commanding tone. In the preceding period, Black militancy had chiefly underscored racial discrimination – but in the later phase, it became more focused on the poverty-stricken working class. It was a move towards the proletarian approach and a Marxist ideology that emphasized an urgency of social justice. The aim was to bridge the financial gap between the upper and the lower segments of the society.

The Depression Decade developed the themes of a relationship between poverty and personal degeneracy and unprecedented implications of the metamorphic process. The transformation highlighted the impact of an agrarian worker's becoming an industrial laborer; the scars of 'being uprooted'; and the dehumanizing influence of protracted dispossession and exploitation. The works of various Negro authors such as William Attaway (*Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 1939 and *Blood on the Forge*, 1941); Anna Bontemps (*God Sends Sunday*, 1931, *Black Thunder*, 1936, and *Drums at Dusk*, 1939); and Waters Edward Turpin (*These Low Grounds*, 1937 and *O Canaan*, 1939) bear the marks of the Depression Decade.

Corresponding to the spirit of the time, which is most powerfully reflected in John Steinbeck's excellent work *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the Black authors of the 1930's were also fervidly responsive to the dispossession of the downcast. Like Steinbeck, whose novel portrays the

miserable conditions of a group of farmers moving from Oklahoma to California, William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* studies the life of three Negro siblings – people who migrate from their native land Kentucky Farm to Western Pennsylvania. Uprooted from their ancient home, they strive unsuccessfully to acquire new roots in the Northern Industrial world and, consequently, diminish and decay there.

The most significant element in Attaway's work is that the author transcends the race issue for class-consciousness. While delineating the industrial North and how it devours vitality of life, he evinces that what is true of the Negroes is also akin to the other workers of the mill (Irish, Italian, Slovaks, etc.). The condition of the white workers is hardly better than that of the blacks. The industrial labor force is shown as forming a union to raise their collective voice against the capitalistic exploitation.

Attaway was the most significant black novelist of the Depression Decade. He excelled his contemporaries on account of his broad outlook and profound understanding of the socio-economic forces of that time. He chiefly evinced his concern for the impoverished Negro migrants; whereas his contemporaries Anna Bontemps and Waters Edward Turpin reflected the spectrum of the racial past and endeavored to capture Negro family life in their respective writings.

The Afro-American journey continued with the swiftly changing socio-economic scenario. The Negro issue, running parallel to it, gradually diversified and acquired multifarious dimensions. Passing through many transitional stages, it crossed the milestones, beheld the turning points, and lived the phases of historical advancement. The Afro-American authorship conscientiously recorded all these sweeping transpositions. In fact, in its artistic expostulations, it unfailingly reconciled the contrasting sentiments and conflicting ideologies with the evolving times.

The high spirit of the Harlem Renaissance and disappointments of the Depression Decade paved the way for many upcoming stalwarts who turned the course of Black authorship altogether. The decades of the 1940's, 50's, and 60's left an indelible mark on the ever-progressing African American literary journey. The trinity of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin dominated this period. It was the World War II era that lasted up to the civil rights legislation of the 1960's. The writings of these three authors were hailed as a search for meaning in the black experience. Collectively, their works are regarded as a true, comprehensive, and wholesome representation of the African American predicament. Their writings unravel what it means to be a 'Black' in America. A Black man who lives as a subject – but who, at the same time, is also treated as an object – faces a dreadful impasse. When the African American man

reflects on his situation, the dilemma of lost agency looms large in the background.

Undoubtedly, the literary output of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin has proven path-breaking. Their works constitute a unique perspective enabling readers to probe into the African American consciousness. Their fictional characters truly ‘flesh out’ the black soul making it incarnate the real life hero/ines. Their minds carry the burden of discontent; and their suppressed passions roar loud in their aching heart. They show how the blended legacy of their unique historical experience turns the African American into a complex cultural trope. It addresses how the black man with his hurling thoughts – all amalgamated and intertwined – grapples with his subjectivity to find out the significance of his life. The protagonists of their novels represent an average black man, who tries to define himself. He gropes in the dark to attain an identity – and, to his amazement, finds himself startlingly transformed in the process. It leads him to ‘self-realization.’ Indeed, the fictional world created by the trio truly incorporates the spirit of the rapidly advancing time. Indeed, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin facilitated – through their forceful literary articulation – an identification of the black voice amidst the widespread white apartheid. Their writings paved the way for further progressive steps in the African American historical march from self-negation to self-assertion.

The post-World War II era opened with a resolute pledge on the part of Black Americans to re-examine the old inequities. Later, the pace of events accelerated with the augmentation of the Civil Rights Movement under the peaceful stratagem of Dr. Martin Luther King. In 1964, Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his brilliant, idealistic leadership. Despite all odds, the Movement succeeded in procuring some substantial gains; viz., the Supreme Court verdict outlawing racial segregation in the educational field in 1954, and the enactment of the Civil Rights legislation in 1957 and 1960. The Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Right Act in 1964 and 1965, respectively. White racial prejudice was so circumscribing that even a century after the Declaration of Emancipation, no substantial improvement in the general condition of the American Negroes was discernible. Dr. Martin Luther King was justified in candidness of his statement that a Negro “lives on a lonely island of poverty, in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity... and finds himself in exile in his own land.” (King, “I Have a Dream” Speech, August 28, 1963)

It portends the overwhelming general sentiment of Black Americans, the glimpses of which are apparently visible in their fictional renderings.