

## Black American women writers: The incredible middle passage

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### Abstract

The unique past of the Black Americans shows their mass captivity, the incredible “middle passage” from their homeland Africa to the New World followed by more than two centuries of chattel slavery on the American slave plantations. Becoming mere property of the white masters, they were treated worse than animals and suffered complete dehumanization. And the history of the Black Americans is the story of their heroic struggle for survival in a highly hostile world. Black American literature documents this unique historical experience and plays a significant role in the mission of racial protest of the Blacks and affirmation of their humanity.

**Keywords:** incredible, racial, dehumanization

### 1. Introduction

The unique past of the Black Americans shows their mass captivity, the incredible “middle passage” from their homeland Africa to the New World followed by more than two centuries of chattel slavery on the American slave plantations. Becoming mere property of the white masters, they were treated worse than animals and suffered complete dehumanization. And the history of the Black Americans is the story of their heroic struggle for survival in a highly hostile world. Black American literature documents this unique historical experience and plays a significant role in the mission of racial protest of the Blacks and affirmation of their humanity.

According to Houston A. Baker Jr., “black American literature like the black American himself is to a large extent a social product” (xvi). Like all literatures, Black American literature had its genesis in its oral traditions. Again, unlike other literatures, it shares the distinctiveness which informs its culture:

The legends of men conquering wild and virgin lands are not the legends of black America; the stories of benevolent theocracies bringing light and salvation to pagans are not the stories of black America; and the tale of pioneers enduring the hardship of the west for the promise of immense wealth are not the tales of black America (Huggins, Kilson and Fox I: 28).

The Black American literature developed primarily as an effort to establish the innate humanity of its people and indict the inhuman tyranny of white culture. “The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate human letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community” (Gates, Signifying Monkey 128). Thus we can understand the significance of the literary attempts of pioneers like Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley and those other antebellum Black writers who followed them. While several critical views

regard these antebellum literature, due to their adherence to conventional white models of theme and expression, as lacking in aesthetic and redemptive value, we cannot overlook their social concerns which become a distinguishing feature of their works. The writings of Olaudah Equiano, David Walker and Maria Stalwart all insist on the dignity and freedom of the Black man. By the 1850's, slave narratives were effective means for exposing the ugly truth of slavery. The slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs exposed the horror of slavery. In these narratives, “...there emerges no “Sambo” figure, childlike and fawning. What emerges is the figure of a man determined to be his own master whatever the obstacles to be overcome” (Huggins, Kilson and Fox I: 184). According to Henry Louis Gates, Douglass wrote because “Without a voice, the African is absent, or defaced, from history” (Figures in Black 104). He continues, “The act of writing for the slave constituted the act of creating a public, historical self, not only the self of the individual self of the individual author but also the self, as it were, of the race” (108). The writings of Martin Delany express his ideas about racial identity and Black nationalism. Other antebellum literary experiments such as William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel* (1853) and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) focused on the themes of the Mulatto and Passing.

Post bellum slave narratives celebrate the spiritual and moral triumph of the Blacks. But the onslaught of the Jim Crow era suddenly reversed the dreams offered by the Reconstruction to a nightmarish reality of renewed oppression. Notwithstanding the fact that it was a period of “Negro Nadir” (Jackson 16), Black literary expression continued to shape and document the social political situation of the period. The popularization of the “Sambo” image or degrading Black stereotypes highlights the cultural dimensions of the racial oppression. As a vital step taken by writers against this cultural repression, we see a shift of focus from the prevailing inferior Black stereotypes to the image of the mulatto and the theme of passing. The mulatto in

postbellum Black American literature was not a tragic figure but a survivor against all odds. A fine example is *Iola Leroy* (1892) by Francis E. W. Harper, the first Black American novel by a woman which depicts a proud Black female protagonist. James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man* (1912) captures through the theme of passing, the complex problem of the Black man's struggle for identity in America.

"Through their use of the trope of passing and the foregrounding of seemingly more conventional all-but-white protagonists, African American writers also opened a space for the non-caricatural representation of visibly black characters and for a re-evaluation of the distinctiveness of African American culture."

(Graham 40).

Given the above historical facts, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chestnutt, the most prominent Black writers during the period, who were accused for their accommodative stance, certainly had a message for their people:

We smile, but, O great Christ our cries

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But let the world dream otherwise

We wear the mask ! (Gates and McKay : 918)

The mask becomes for Dunbar, a means to protect his Black self and continue his struggle for survival in the white world. In the same vein, Booker T. Washington's view of self-help in *Up from Slavery* (1901) certainly charts a way for Black self-sufficiency and definition. On a graver note, W.E.B. Du Bois, the tireless and multifaceted champion of the Blacks at the turn of the 20th century declared, "The Problem of the 20th Century is the Problem of the Color-line" (Du Bois xi). He explores the psychological dimensions of the duality in the negro self:

"One ever feel his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American negro is the history of this strife-this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for the world. He simply wishes to make if possible for a map to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by this fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face" (45-46).

All throughout his life until his death, Du Bois remained a dauntless fighter for the recognition of Black dignity and liberty. The race-pride and militancy championed by Du Bois became the theme of the 1920's that marked the Harlem

Renaissance. The negro renaissance was a period which, "...embodied a rebirth, an outpouring of the black American spirit..."

(Baker 8). The rejection of white dominant values and a deep sense of race pride and concern fostered a new sense of identity and consciousness which resulted in the birth of the "New Negro" (Locke 3). This sense of re-discovery, re-awakening and social consciousness were factors which explain clearly the militant nationalistic attitude of Garveyism or the great cultural and literary achievement of the period.

Must my heart grow sick and falter,  
Wishing He I served were black,

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Surely then this flesh would know

Yours had born a kindred woe. (Gates and McKay 1349)

The pain of Black experience expressed by Countee Cullen rings with the note of repudiation of the white God which turns into Black outrage in Claude McKay's Sonnet:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.

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Like men, we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the walk, dying, but fighting back ! (1007)

Langsten Hughes exults in Black pride:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
Flow of human blood in human veins. (1291)

During this period, the Black American oral literature had been invigorated through the efforts of the renaissance writers. Black American folklore comprises the fullest reflection of what James Weldon described as "the humor and pathos" of Black life expressed in a form and language charged with power and beauty (Baker 4). The new mood discovered in this oral heritage, the source of a cultural identity for the writers. Thus Zola Neale Hurston shows "the wonderful richness and beauty of black folk culture" (Christian 9). Alain Locke sums up the essence of the period:

"By shedding the old chrysalis of the negro problem, we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. Until recently, lacking self-understanding, we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others. But the decade that found us with a problem has left us with only a task. The multitude perhaps feels as yet only a strange relief and a new vague urge, but the thinking few know that in the reaction the vital inner grip of prejudice has been broken"(Locke 4).

The Renaissance was short-lived and ended with the Great Depression of the 1930's but its significance lay in its inauguration of a phase of Black consciousness which was to continue with new energies in the forthcoming decades. During the 1940's and the 1960's, Black American literature focused on the issues of Black urban life. Richard Wright, the

Black protest fiction writer portrays in his masterpiece *The Native Son* (1940), the tragic situation of the Black man who became a symbol of violence and terror to himself and the white world which had rejected him. The great social and political tension, resulting from factors such as new outlook, increasing opportunities and the landmark struggle for civil rights brought about striking changes in the lives of American Blacks. It was a time of promise of integration and unity. But the dark reality of racism lurked beneath the promise of integration and unity and the Black American literature of the period reflects the complex mood of the time. The nameless protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible man* (1952), portrays the non-existent situation of the Black, rendered an invisible entity by the white world blinded by prejudice. James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), tells the story of the evolution of a young Black man as he seeks his self-hood. As the 60's continued, we see once more the emergence of the revolutionary aspirations of the Black Power movement. Black Americans discovered:

“Black was “beautiful” and a major mission - if not *the* major mission - of black who understood their world was to spread the worth of blackness and the abominable quality of white America” (Jackson 25).

Africa, liberated from white colonization, became for Blacks in America, a source of pride and identity. The Black Arts movement was the cultural dimension of the movement which strove to promote Black cultural identity. In other words, the Black Arts movement and the revolutionary aesthetics of the Black Aesthetic theory were all an integral part of the movement that signaled the birth of a new Black world exhibiting the greatness of Black power. Catherine Juanita Starke comments:

“In these ways, ethnic writers had succeeded in moving blacks from colored shame to black pride contrasting dramatically with stock or archetypal portraits, those of black avengers reflect the re-discovery of truth, goodness and beauty in blackness and in celebration of one's self. They reflect also the contemporary high level of black aspiration and its corollary low level of frustration and tolerance of existing conditions; hence the explosiveness of situations or plots in which their portraits are depicted, all of which are frightening metaphors of contemporary American society” (253).

*The Slave* (1964) by Le Roi Jones is a fitting example of such an explosive situation where the protagonist strives to liberate himself and seeks vengeance against an oppressive world culminating in self-destruction. The tumultuous energies of the 60's however were not destined to continue for long as the revolutionary aesthetic theories, suffering from its own excesses came to an abrupt end. Nonetheless, the movement left its mark in fostering a new trend in Black American writing that focuses on black life and experience more fully than ever before. And interestingly it is the Black women who have dominated the literary scene.

The 60's and 70's saw the emergence of Black women writers in every genre, Paula Masshall, Maya Angelou,

NtozakaShange, Gayle Jones, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice walker and Toni Morrison among others who have changed the face of Black American literature. This is indeed a significant development, taking into account, the marginalized position of Black women who have been victimized by racism, classism and also gender oppression at the hands of both white and their own Black men. The lives of Black women have been an experience of unspeakable degradation and abuse. Throughout Black American literary history, Black American women writers like Frances Harper, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry, committed themselves to addressing the problems of their womenfolk. However, they couldn't bring much change in the predicament of the Black women. The social and political climate of self - assertion that swept the later part of the 20th Century was a turning point for them. Black women writers became empowered enough to rise and challenge the oppressive male-dominated system and make articulate, the unheard voice of the long suppressed Black woman. Contemporary Black women writers deal with the experience of Black people in general and Black women in particular whose lives have been victimized by the ills of racism, sexism and classism. They examine the inner lives of Black women, their conflicts, hopes, strengths, failures and triumphs and stress a communal consciousness. The characters are individuals who seek their growth and survival in their community. It is pertinent to note that this present trend is not altogether new but in fact, a legacy of a tradition that traces back to Zora Neale Hurston. Writing in the 1920's, this unique Black woman writer of the Harlem Renaissance had already dwelt on the themes of community, individual women, Black folk culture and its oral tradition. Thus, Hurston stands as a fitting model for present day Black American women writers and she influenced many new Black writer like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Alice walker's concept of “womanism” centers on “the black female subject in the process of achieving wholeness” (Graham 234). It envisages the liberation of the Black woman from all kinds of oppression and the achievement of wholeness through the Black female communal experience. Celie in walker's novel, *The color purple* (1983), illustrates this evolution of consciousness. Paula Marshall's *Brown girl, Brownstones* (1981), tells another such story of a female protagonist's search for wholeness. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), presents in a similar manner, the Black woman's re-discovery of self through the healing power of the community. In this relation, Patrick Bryce Bjork has pointed out, “Morrison's work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single, private self” (The Novels of Toni Morrison viii).

Thus Black women writers bring to us issues which have earlier been excluded and ignored in white mainstream and Black male writings. The expansive literature of Black women writers which brings under its fold, such vital issues as community, identity, bonding, sexism, racism clearly presents the whole of Black life and experience which “... reaffirm and celebrate black culture than any protest/ political black literature can ever do” (23).

Their pre-occupation with the interlocking realities of racism,

classism and sexism necessarily forms a fundamental aspect of their larger commitment to the mission for the liberation of all Black people. It is an integral part of the dream – the dream of equality and freedom of Black people in America. The dream, however deceptive, have given the Black man a reason to live It had stirred the visions of leaders throughout the history of an enslaved people, from Frederick Douglass, to Marcus Garvey, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. and have inspired the Black man throughout his dauntless struggle against human tyranny. Whatever the course of Black American experience in the future, the dream will always be an integral part of Black life; it will remain an integral element of its literature.

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