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Importance of self-knowledge: Tracing the journey of Afro - American women in literature

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Abstract

A number of researches has been done regarding the Afro-American identity, the status of the blacks in America, for instance a research conducted by Kathy Harrison (Graduate Student, Psychology Department, Wayne State University) who has written about the African American identity particularly for black youth. Various fictional and autobiographical works have also been written about the blacks, and by the blacks too where they have talked about their sufferings, struggles and tormented life, Black women like Harriet Jacob's autobiographical work *Incidents of the life of a slave girl* (1861) have also talked about their sufferings, their struggle, the rights of their community which were hitherto undelivered as well as the sexual abuse which they have faced before the civil rights movement and the paper shall further carry these issues. The major objective shall be to depict the Afro- American people's struggles or the racism or sexism and it shall explore in special light the Afro-American women. It shall also trace their journey towards wholeness, That is the factors that helped them grow as individuals even under dual oppression that they lived through. The paper studies the interrelationship of sexism and racism that troubled and limited the life of the Afro-American women. The effects of the double consciousness and the emerging intersection of racism and sexism in America as well as the black community, which was faced by the black women, The paper has the objective to trace the struggle of these women who evolved and grew in their journey of being an object, to an individual, and how these women became self -asserting independent beings voicing out their sufferings. The paper will help to enlighten the readers regarding the Afro-American women's sufferings and it will also help the readers towards the importance of self- knowledge, individual identity and the importance of family life, community, sisterhood, spirituality and the importance of freedom of women.

Keywords: Afro - American Women, Double-consciousness, racism, sexism, Sisterhood, wholeness, self-assertion

Introduction

The fact that the Black Americans or Afro-Americans are in America is the outcome of the abduction of their ancestors from their homes in Africa. These Afro Americans were mostly the descendants of the slaves who were brought from their homes in Africa (see Lynch, 2019, para 2). After surviving the brutal middle passage from Africa, African American ancestors were enslaved in one of the most physically and psychologically brutal systems ever formulated in American history. The dominant American people viewed African men and women as property, dehumanizing black people by defining them as nonhuman, they were treated as slaves, they faced oppression, they were lynched, killed, burned out, they had to live under poverty, social injustices and inequality until the Civil Right Movement came up (see ushistory.org, 2009, *Slave life and Slave Codes*). This was the condition of the black Afro-Americans but the Afro-American women were the worst sufferers amongst them. The Afro-American women's history is affected by the double consciousness, they lived through the conditions emerging from the juncture of racism and sexism. The black women were saddled with dual stereotypes of race and gender, they had to work in fields as slave, nurse the children, prepare meals and maintain household as any other women were expected to do, while also standing beside their male counterparts fighting for equal rights, pleading for justice which was due to the Afro-Americans who were being oppressed by the dominant American culture (Beal, Frances (2008) [6]. *Double Jeopardy: To be black and female.*). The black women faced many limitations, put on them by their family, husband, their race, their class, whites and the American fair-skinned society which considered them 'masculine' and 'Immoral'. They had to deal with the constraints that the society often imposes on female

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sexuality, the society not only of the whites but of their own black society as well which view women as objects essentially as a mother, a wife, or the lover of a man. So, the Afro-American women experienced the interrelationship of sexism and racism in society and so, the development of the Afro-American women's fiction also appears as a mirror image of this intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in America.

The Afro-American fictions were initially dismissed as 'provincial' by the white critics and also it was poor with sales and publicity but later on in the 1980's they gained popularity and appeared as bestsellers, received critical acclaim being regarded as both exciting and controversial. The eminent leaders of this pioneering new fiction were Black women who were initially the invisible authors in literary tradition, they were initially the writers relegated to the backstage or rather offstage, ignored altogether but slowly and steadily some works of these black writers emerged and opened their world in front of the other people who were unknown to their problems, their sufferings and their point of views. These Afro- American writers tried to express the social injustices through which they were suffering from majorly in the 19's and 20's, for instance, we can see the slave narrative '*Our Nig*' written by Harriet. E. Wilson the earliest known Afro - American novelist, also other writers work like Frances Harper's novel '*Iola Leroy*' addressed to the racist and sexist white society.

At the initial beginning the Afro-American writers observed the injustice towards themselves, they noticed the inequality or negative identity imposed on them due to their black color, then these writers tried to or rather were conditioned by the need to establish a "positive" images of black people in the mind of the whites through their work and characterization, they did not claim for equal rights or against the discrimination rather tried to justify themselves in front of the whites to become a piece of desirable property in the eyes of the white Americans, Also in the initial beginning the black women writers were not conscious of their own value, the American society considered them as masculine because they were unable to fit in the Victorian fair skinned feminine ideals so in their writings rather than celebrating and asserting their own color, their own ideals they tried to prove that the black women are women, they are beautiful, pure, upper class and they tried to drive towards that shallow feminine ideal of the white Americans, the attempt to present "positive" images of the black woman, to restrict her characterization to a prescribed ideal, did not result in any improvement in her image or in her condition and also in this kind of writings the exploration of self, in all its complexity, could hardly be attempted.

The Afro-Americans faced the problem of racism, sexism, injustices, inequality, stereotyped American ideals and prejudices against the blacks but most importantly they faced the problem of acceptance of the 'self', and only when they had started to learn 'self- knowledge' were they able to cope up with larger social forces and injustices and this shift in point of view came up majorly through the fiction and literature in the 1960s where there was a shift in the point of view and intentions of the authors who now started putting more emphasis and reflecting the process of self-definition, self-assertion, and self-understanding, the Afro-American women writers started to accept themselves as they are, they started to rediscover their blackness and the unity in their

blackness which can help them cope up the injustices of racism as well as sexism and to mark this shift we can refer to authors like Gwendolyn Brook and her work *Maud Martha* wherein she portrays the complex existence of a dark skinned girl asserting her different identity in the literature, omitting the feminist ideal of the American society in her characterization Brook paints a portrait of an ordinary black woman, first as daughter, then as mother, and then to show what she makes of her "little life". Because of her 'awareness', Maud Martha constructs her standards and manages to transform that "little life" into so much more despite the limits set on her by her family, husband, her race, her class, whites and the overall American society.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's Afro-American women writers started asserting their identity further. Now, not only the characters were definitely blacks but they also started insisting on the centrality of black women to Afro-American history, the black women in the fictions of these writers were depicted evolving from the position of an object to the position of an individual, the writers started reflecting at how the quality of black women's lives is affected by the interrelationship of sexism and racism and Alice Walker belonged to the same age of these Afro-American women writers. She through her novels, short stories, poems, and essays presented the plight of black women and their struggle to voice their suffering, she essentially described the "Womanism" and her concern for her southern heritage, the heritage and culture of the black Afro-Americans.

The female Authors were now trying to reflect their identity through their protagonists, these protagonists emerged from the hardships and the context of oppression both based on race and gender to asserting their rights. Several novels were written during this time openly talked about the plight and growth of black women from an object to an individual. In their writings, the authors explored multidimensional kinships among women and embraced the redemptive power of social and political revolution. The authors saw the possibility of empowerment and the growth of Afro-American women, if they create a community of sisters or "sisterhood" which had the power to alter the unnatural definitions of man and woman. These works explored self-assertion, self-dependence, acceptance of the self and economic independence as a means to the growth of these suppressed Afro American women. In this way we witnessed the evolution of the Afro American women, the writers portrayed these evolutions through their works it depicted the ultimate emancipation and evolution of these women from these suffocating conditions to a more happy and peaceful individualistic identity; portrays the strength of the family, society, community, self- worth and spirituality as integral elements in the process of evolution. They worked to enlighten the readers about the unheard plight of these women who through their own experiences learned the way to emerge and finally assert their identity. These literary pieces also in some way or the other enabled the readers to find out the factors responsible for the growth of Afro-American women that ultimately proved helpful in creating social awareness regarding the black women's sufferings as well as the important factors through which women can attain an individual status.

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