

The Black Experience from African Roots to the Black Identity in America: The Odyssey of Pain, Agony and Nostalgia

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Abstract

The people of Africa were dragged to the New World, where they were enslaved and put to work and starved to death. The atrocities that African people witness are ongoing even today. This paper aims to take a journey through the history of African people. The article is divided into two parts: the first part is a concise history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and of its cultural and sociological aftermath in the New World, where the struggle between the South and the North exploited African Americans even after the Civil War. The second part focuses on the literary production of the African people, in order to connect these with experiences defined by pain, agony and nostalgia.

Keywords: Atlantic Slave Trade, Afro-American Literature, Black Culture, Segregation

Introduction

The Black experience that came from African roots and matured through dehumanizing slavery is a historical process of becoming, out of which black consciousness, sobriety and intellectualism have emerged. The experience itself was almost unprecedented, in that people underwent such traumatic experience that they ended up encountering crucial moments of self-denial, thus becoming the ‘invisible man’ (Titles of Ralph Ellison to be dealt with later). However, the long experience of suffering has taught black people how to come to terms with their identity, proclaiming it finally to a something to be proud of, from invisibility to visibility. A black voice began to develop, which found expression in literature and music in America, always returning to the rich sources of their presence in Africa. The continent has always charmed them; yet, it was almost always impossible for them to cross the great Atlantic that divided Africa, the cradle of humankind, and America, the new soil on which the new black man became a ‘black American’. This paper purports to explain the evolutionary odyssey across the Atlantic to America and on to the whole world, thus revealing also black culture, its transformation, and from where it has always been nourished.

The sociological and historical venture of the African people in the New World

Since Africa is the only continent where scientists have found evidence regarding the evolution of mankind from its earliest roots, Africa has long been considered as ‘the cradle of humankind’ (Hunt Davis Jr. cited in Azevedo 2005: 55). Changes to the African physical environment, like desiccation of the Sahara Desert and deforestation for the purpose of expanding cultivated areas, are followed by crucial transformations in the historical becoming of African American identity.

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The constraints and conditions of the physical environment play a great role in social development. Hunt Davis Jr. states that the more humans integrate themselves with nature, while also developing technologies, the more they diversify their environment. They thus proceed and develop technologies while they diversify the environment:

Humans through their technology have progressively lessened or altered the constraints of the physical environment to the point that today the relationship between human society and the physical environment is vastly different, and vastly more complex, than it was a century ago, let alone several thousand years ago. (Azevedo 2005: 55)

Owing much to its abundant environment, which the natives of Africa have taken full advantage of, Africans revealed a mastery of coping with the African environment, making much of it in terms of exposing their potential for evolution and development there:

Africa was at the forefront of two developments that were crucial in enabling human society to advance to more complex stages – food production and metallurgy; and, finally, that the early states in Africa were indigenous in origin and demonstrated the ability of Africans to develop and master the potential of the differing environments of the continent. (Azevedo 2005: 69)

Africa, bordered by the Atlantic, the ocean that expands westward, offered new possibilities of progress as the wave of development preceded by the African continent extended towards the Americas through the Atlantic Ocean. Today, the great assumption is that ‘Atlantic history is the combination of several national histories and their extensions overseas - that its essential character lies in the aggregation of four or five discrete European histories together with the regional histories of the native peoples of West Africa and America’ (Bailyn 2005: 60). Since the Atlantic had rich resources and was filled with new opportunities for merchants, it became the main target for Europeans due to the trading opportunities it offered them, a practice which transformed the Atlantic into an amalgamation of different cultures. However, before the first awareness of the Atlantic, for Arab geographers, the Atlantic was the Sea of Darkness and the Great Green Sea of Gloom (Benjamin, 2009). Highly influenced with the teaching of Bible, there was a similar conception of the Atlantic in the minds of Europeans. According to the Bible (see Job 40:15-24), the helix serpent Leviathan was penetrating the deep waters alongside with other creatures, so like the Atlantic, other oceans or waters were also shown as a perilous abyss. There was neither sea nor ocean in paradise, and this belief went as far back as ancient Greece, where Plato assumed in his *Timaeus* that once it was possible to ‘pass to the whole of the opposite continent which surrounded the true ocean’ but then after the island of Atlantis, it was not possible ‘to sail upon that gulf, for the passage was blocked at the Pillars of Hercules’ (Plato & Jowett 2009: 21). Pliny (2004) also reflected in his *Natural History* ‘that the seas that cut off the land split the habitable earth in half, for they cannot be passed across from here, nor from there to here.’ However, when it comes to the penetration of the far Atlantic which occurred around 9th and 10th centuries by most notably Norse and by some Irish sailors to Iceland and Greenland, it is possible to suggest that spreading the word through the Bible was the main obstacle that prevented the far Atlantic to be crossed by many sailors not until the 15th century, though the 14th century already witnessed sailors bold enough to ‘attempt with voyages from miscellaneous Mediterranean and Atlantic countries

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to the islands of the near Atlantic, especially the Canary Islands, Madeira and the Azores' (Benjamin 2009). On the other hand, regarding the Norse people, their encounters with the Atlantic can be traced back to 'the reference made to the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 by the Anglo-Saxon monk Alcuin, in a letter to Ethelred of Northumbria, king of one of the five or six independent kingdoms into which England was then divided' (Ferguson 2017: 4).

Once Europeans were en route from various European harbours to the shores of 'the New World', they exploited not only the natural resources of the Atlantic, but also its inhabitants. For this reason, The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade began around the mid-fifteenth century as the Portuguese displayed a high interest in Africa, which included the readily available commodity of 'Human Trade,' rather than fantastical deposits of gold. In the dawn of the seventeenth century, the trade was at its height, stretching into a 'big bang' about the turn of the eighteenth century. This immense slave trade was a nasty commerce which was profitable for Europeans as every stage of the trade journey in the notorious triangle of destinations could be profitable for white traders. It is because any kind of humiliation or harassment was allowed so long as it was useful for the 'homo-economicus' white man 'to tame' the wild black man. For the Europeans, Africans were no different to 'wild animals', or at best they were somewhere between animals and humans, like the missing link in the long process of evolution from animals to humans (Benjamin 2009).

The escalating European empires in this virgin New World were starving for one supply: humans and their immense labour. Historically speaking, regarding such total colonisations, local people were forced to work for the usurpers. Nevertheless, the indigenous peoples of the New World had proved to be too vulnerable to infections, while the people who were shipped from Europe could not adapt to the climate and struggled with tropical diseases. Africans, on the other hand, were exceptional workers since they often had practice of agriculture and cattle breeding, and they were accustomed to bearing a tropical climate. What is more, their immune systems were resilient to tropical diseases, and they could be forced to work under these harsh conditions without any rebellion on plantations or in mines unlike the indigenous Americans who were prone to resist. Though such a resistance seems like a very natural flaw in human reaction, it is nothing compared to the statistics regarding the monstrous size of the Atlantic slave trade (Williamson 2007).

Between 1440 and 1640, Portugal established a strong monopoly on taking slaves from Africa. This cartel gave them not only exceptional economic privilege, but also military supremacy over other nations. For this reason, it is notable that they were also the last European country to eradicate the disgrace of slavery. It is reckoned that during 450 years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Portugal itself was responsible for carrying over 4.5 million Africans - which is approximately 40% of the entire slave trade in the world – across the Atlantic. According to Robin Blackburn:

As the trade grew, the monarch raised the price of trading licenses and introduced special taxes...The *Casa da Mina* in Lisbon, chartered by the King and with its office in his palace, supervised the Mina trade, receiving the royal fifth on all gold transactions. By about 1500 a caravel would leave El Mina every month with gold worth more than 10,000 ducats, in the years 1511 and 1513. The King's total income from contractors in the slave trade and from the sale of the 'King's slaves' in around 1511 to 1513 is assessed by Saunders at 7 million reis a year, or some 18,000 ducats, a useful addition to the larger profits made on the Mina trade. (1999: 107)

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Alongside Portugal, throughout the eighteenth century, 6 million abused Africans were transported from their homes to the slave markets. British companies were among the major slave traders, and held responsible for transporting almost 2.5 million slaves. This is a true record mostly overlooked by those who recurrently cite England's great role in the elimination of the slave trade. Slaves were familiarized to new diseases, and they were highly exposed to malnutrition and starvation even before they could disembark at the ports of the new world. This suggests that merchants did not regard black slaves as humans. For merchants, slaves had no greater value than as simple 'goods' to be transported for trade. It is also understood that the majority of the casualties on the voyage across the Atlantic - the middle passage – were seen amid the first couple of weeks, and were a result of extreme hunger, numerous epidemic diseases, and long, strained walks on bare feet that ensured burial at slave camps on the coast of Americas. Because of the slave trade, the number of Africans that were carried to America was five times higher than that of slaves carried to Europe. Brazil, the Caribbean islands, and the Spanish Empire were the main places where those slaves were put to work entailing intensive labour, such as mine digging or plantation work. Approximately 5% moved to the Northern American States legally held by the British. These living conditions, of course, did not mean that they were equal to the white man but at least they had an opportunity to survive (Benjamin 2009).

Throughout the period, the North Atlantic slave trade maintained its existence as a formal institution in America, since it easily manifested as a form of life in early colonial America. Slavery became such an important institution that, without the work of slaves and indentured servants, the economic expansion of the colonies would have come to a halt. Including Benjamin Franklin, all founders of the country, in one way or another, had possession of slaves, and in Britain, 'most of the House of Commons...and a hundred members of the House of Lords' (Benjamin 2009: 241) as well as Alexander Pope and Sir Isaac Newton had shares in the slave trade.

Of course, slavery was not the only way of supplying a cheap workforce. In addition to slaves from Africa, the colonies relied on other forms of cheap labour. This was due to rising demand in the fields and a desire to make more money with lower costs. Many people of European descent paid their way to the colonies by approving papers declaring their official indenture. Indentured servants were mainly slaves that were officially bound to their owners for years; nevertheless, they had less value than the permanent slaves since owners could not sell indentured slaves to third parties. Selling people like commodities was very common. As stated, like most of his contemporaries, Franklin initially assumed that African slaves and their descendants were inferior to white Europeans and they could not be educated. This idea was to be refuted by both Franklin himself and the work done by Booker T. Washington under the Tuskegee Institute. However, for the time being, African people were thought of as workers, nothing more. In a sense, the white man's job was to 'tame and train' black people to work in the fields or mines until they collapsed because of exhaustion. However, somehow, Franklin started to question his opinions when he made a visit to a school where young African children were being taught. Then, in 1763, he sent a letter to an English friend where he stated:

I was on the whole much pleased, and from what I then saw, have conceived a higher opinion of the natural capacities of the black race, than I had ever before entertained. Their apprehension

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seems as quick, their memory as strong, and their docility in every respect equal to that of white children. (Public Broadcasting Service – PBS, 2002)

With the *Declaration of Independence*, The United States published a statement, which announced the adoption of a Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. The statement declared that the 13 American colonies were in a conflict with Great Britain, and no longer considered themselves a part of the British Empire. This act became the nation's most celebrated symbol of liberty. Though at a first glance this Declaration was on behalf of all American inhabitants to unite them under a single roof, Thomas Jefferson's words seemed to fail on behalf of the black slave population. Although Jefferson was known to be against slavery, according to William Cohen, Jefferson had a 5,000-acre plantation and kept hundreds of slaves throughout his lifetime (Iwabuchi 1998: 510). The continuation of the slavery system triggered even bigger problems in the U.S.A. To start with, while Northern states were mainly dependent on industrial areas, most of the Southern states built up agrarian societies where they needed an immense work force. In that sense, the farmers in the Southern states were in favour of spreading slavery rather than terminating it. The reason behind this was very simple: had they hired labourers instead of slaves, they would have paid wages instead of abusing the slaves or making them work to death. For this reason, they created a strong political lobby to avoid emancipation. During that time, some politicians were indifferent towards the problem of slavery but, because of considerations about the votes that they might lose, they were not opposing the Southerners. On the other hand, to gain political mileage, some Northerners tended to limit the influence of Southerners in politics simply by attacking on the idea of slavery. In Northern states, African Americans and their white partners were high-spirited regarding the chance of abolishing the slavery. They gathered in local churches and meeting halls and became optimistic about the developments such as the uniting of white and black people against slavery. In the South, people were mostly unaware of these developments while in the course of the Civil War; the northern forces were not only fighting for political opposition but also for protecting the union that they established together. Though there were some Southern African Americans that enrolled in the Northern army, it was not until Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation that the federal army would legitimately recruit African Americans into the ranks of the federal army. Lincoln's decision gave its results, as McPherson states: '[b]y ones and twos, dozens and scores, they continued to convert themselves 'contrabands' by coming into Union lines. It proved extremely difficult for their owners to pry them out again, even in the unionist Border States' (McPherson 2003: 357). Among famous abolitionists, Frederick Douglass, Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Henry Highland Garned received soldiers from the North to join the forces. By the time the war ended, it was estimated that around 186,000 African American soldiers had enrolled in the Union army. During the first enrolments of the soldiers, there was some segregation. They were kept out of direct fighting, and there were some high voices against black officers. On the other hand, in Southern states many slaves fled to Northern ranks by not remaining loyal to their so-called 'owners'. Eventually, on April 18, 1865, the Civil War ended with the renunciation of the Confederate army. About 617,000 people were war casualties. Many people had been injured. The southern landscape was wrecked (WGBH, *The Africans in America*, n.d.).

However, even after the Civil War, violence against black Americans continued. Sadly, the end of the war was not the end of suffering. During the 1870s, white Democrats recaptured political

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power; thus, they legislated many inequalities to lower the status of former slaves and detach them from the rest of society. Moreover, through racist discourses against blacks, there were protests against African Americans wherever they went. As a result of these protests, lynchings started during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in America and England, as well as its colonies. It is estimated that more than 3,500 people were killed in these lynchings. It was partly because of insurgent groups like Ku Klux Klan that many innocent people were massacred. In addition to the records of the Tuskegee Institute, 1,297 lynchings were carried out on Chinese and Mexican people as well (Lynching in America, EJI – Listen n.d.).

Because of the lynchings, many African Americans had to migrate from Southern states to the Northern states. The 1910 to 1930 Great Migration resulted in the displacement of two million African Americans out of the South of the United States, as they moved to the Midwest, North-East and West. The reason for this mass migration was to avoid the segregation and prejudicial treatment they got in the South. They were also looking for jobs in the industrial cities in the areas mentioned previously. Some historians like to break up the mass migrations into two distinct migrations. The names given to these were the First Great Migration, which occurred from 1910 to 1940, and the Second Great Migration that happened in 1940-1970. The First Great Migration saw roughly 1.6 million migrants move from the South while the Second Great Migration saw a much larger migration. There were over five million people, who moved from the South to other destinations; so, they could have a better life. In 1965-1970, there were 14 states from the South, which contributed to the large migration of people. The states that mostly contributed to this movement were Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, and this large contribution could be seen in the other three regions of the United States. Towards the end of the Second Great Migration, African Americans had transformed themselves into metropolitan inhabitants. Approximately 80% of the African American population was living in cities, roughly 53% remained in the South, and 40% lived in the North-East and North Central states and 7% in the West of the United States ('The Second Great Migration,' n.d.). Since 1965, a trend known as a reverse migration has been gathering strength, dubbed the New Great Migration. Between 1963 and 2000, the movements of African Americans were away from areas their ancestors migrated to, and they are now migrating back to the South. One of the main reasons for this is the de-industrialization of North-eastern and Midwestern cities. High quality jobs and improved racial relations have also made the South more attractive to many African-Americans. However, this migration was an intentional movement to seek better job opportunities rather than caused by the racial attacks that their ancestors went through. It does not mean that all racial problems have been solved. Coming back to the reverse migration, some people even moved back because of family and lineage ties. From 1995 to 2000, Georgia, Texas and Maryland were all states that were attractive to many black college graduates. California, on the other hand, saw a decline in the black population in the late 1990s. This is only the layout of a more recent picture. However, to understand today's picture, one must understand the effects of black immigration on contemporary culture; as it is shown above, it is a must to trace the steps of the slave trade and the great migration, as a result.

Coming back to the conditions in late nineteenth century, in 1863, the date that Emancipation Proclamation was pronounced, no more than 8% of the African-American population were living in the North-Eastern or Midwestern areas of the United States. In 1900, about 90% of African Americans were residing in the Southern states. The population in Northern

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states grew by about 40% in 1910-1930. This was mostly seen in the major cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New York and Cleveland. These places had the biggest growth in the early half of the century. The changes were primarily concentrated in cities among the working-class. European migrants thought that their jobs were going to be taken away from them by the newly arrived black people whom, for white people, were ready to accept lower wages just to have jobs. Notwithstanding the difficulties they were facing, Africans continued to move to America as individuals or small family groups. They had to fight in a competitive environment where they were bereft of governmental support. Meanwhile, black workers became indispensable labourers due to their low costs and endurance.

As a matter of fact, Africans left to escape the discrimination and segregation of late nineteenth century constitutions and Jim Crow laws (Justice Network, 'Jim Crow laws 1876 – 1965' n.d.). The Jim Crow laws were public and limited laws in the United States passed between 1876 and 1965. They authorised de jure racial apartheid in all public amenities, with an allegedly 'separate but equal' position for black Americans. In fact, this resulted in behaviours and lodgings that were usually inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing a number of economic, educational and social shortcomings (History.com Editors, 2018). Africans created a new opportunity in Northern states which would also bring a halt to European immigration. Black people were able to make their way through harsh conditions and raise their voices against the harsh working conditions and the lynchings. They were forced to migrate more than once from one place to another, on top of the awful events their ancestors witnessed. However, all these conditions were reflected in the literature, music and art that they produced.

The reflections of the Black experience on Black culture in America

To better understand the impact of Africans, especially in America and Europe, African American studies are essential. This field focuses on the fundamental historical traces of African people in both Africa and the Western world. It seeks for a better understanding on how African culture and heritage shaped today's Western culture (Adams, 1984: 201-225). The philosophies of African American society are supported strongly by black intellectuals. They embody the juxtaposed effects of the African American historical past and today's psychological facts. The axis of symmetry of racial duality of black and white interactions has led to a racial split among Western society. This split mentality, as also revealed in black people, is discussed by Pan-Africanist Sociologist W.E.B. DuBois in his *The Souls of Black Folk*:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twines, — 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. (DuBois, 2009: 87)

The haunting legend of the oppressed African soul becomes the core of the newly defined African-American identity of that time. An individual cannot be separated from their past, nor

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eliminated from the long-lasting integration of the American society, where African American contributions throughout the evolution of modern America extend from plantations to the Civil War, WWI, WWII and the Vietnam War. These cannot be ignored, let alone all arts and sciences. Yet, all these contributions could not hold the splitting image back. This split image of the African American is also reflected in relations in social discourse, the philosopher, Cornel West in *Race Matters* writes about black leadership disarray as:

It is the gross deterioration of personal, familiar, and communal relations among African Americans, those relations which constitute a crucial basis for the development of a collection and critical consciousness and a moral commitment to and courageous engagement with causes beyond that of one's self and family. (West, 2001: 29)

Both DuBois and West share a common desire for psychological wholeness or 'one-ness' that would evolve the strength of the black individual and the black community. This functional stress on 'two-ness' or double-consciousness which they both mention has fashioned compulsive problems of self-identity for African Americans that could even go to a final self-denial. Actually, this process is a decolonization of the identity where the distinctiveness of Africans was forced to integrate into something that they were not. To present it through the words of Fanon, [d]ecolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation" (Fanon, 2004: 2). Of course, such changes and liberations were the preliminary considerations of black intellectuals as well, as they become the hope of other oppressed people all around the world. As Martin Luther King Jr., one of the most influential figures of African American history, stated once, '[t]he determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from every form of oppression springs from the same profound longing for freedom that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world' (King & Washington 2006: 7). In addition to West, Fanon and DuBois, African American scholars have been concerned about the epistemological, political and pedagogical consequences of their endeavours. Another review and summary of influential works by African American scholars and activists in history, sociology, psychology and the other fields of sciences suggest that social and situational occasions encourage the evolution of different methods in the academic research of the experience of communities containing people of African descent. This evolution has continued for at least a century and was formed by the contributions of a minor group of significant people, such as Carter G. Woodson, Malcolm X, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, and E. Franklin Fraizer, to name only a few. These intellectuals were isolated fighters throughout the days of endorsed racial apartheid and unconcealed white supremacy over communal education programmes in the entire nation. Nevertheless, in the last twenty or thirty years, another, larger assemblage of privileged African American academics have arisen. Thomas Holt and John Blassingame in the History of Science, Andrew Billingsley in Sociology and William Cross in Psychology. Following this, black leaders and pioneers have not only increased in number and become sturdier in incomes, but also fashioned numerous public intellects, among whom are Molefe Asante, Derrick Bell, Stephen Carter, Michael Dyson, Gerald Early, Henry Louis Gates, Bell Hooks, June Jordan, Maulana Karenga, Randall Kennedy, David Lewis, Glenn Loury, Manning Marable, Toni Morrison, Nell Painter and Orlando Patterson. While it is not clear if all

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those philosophers can be counted as Afrocentrists, at least it is possible to purport that they characterize the existence of African Americans in modern intellectual life (Azevedo 2005: 339-378). Afrocentrism, as a philosophy, also showed up on the American educational stage precisely at the time that the conventional archetypal mono-cultural viewpoint was being defied by emerging multiculturalism. This ideology is not only influential for new studies but also very instrumental to understand black history. It contests the very basics of the old dogmatic perceptual orders and canons. Afrocentrism is the appreciation stage of people of their historical facts and cultural analyses.

Afrocentrists characterise the persistence of the speculative and societal scuffle of African Americans to pinpoint a reliable standpoint, which reproduces the bottomless truths about themselves, and the humanity in which they live and in which they seek for liberation from racial segregation and racial paranoia, as well as colour blindness. Therefore, from its beginning to the present-day, as an organization, as education and as philosophy, the African American Studies programme has inspired debates about the nature and direction for both American and Western education systems and society (Adams, 1984). Especially on the education of the African descendants, Booker T. Washington's endeavours are worth mentioning. He was the key man behind Tuskegee Institute and became a leader in education of black Americans. Regarding the interest of African American students in education, Washington notes:

...I have never seen a more earnest and willing company of young men and women than these students were. They were all willing to learn the right thing as soon as it was shown them what was right. I was determined to start them off on a solid and thorough foundation, so far as their books were concerned. I soon learned that most of them had the merest smattering of the high-sounding things that they had studied. (Washington, 1986: 123)

It is not surprising to find out about the ambition of black people who had an extreme hunger for knowledge. The more information they gathered, the more contribution they made, especially in literature to reflect their pain and agony. They needed reading and studying despite all the hostilities. They knew that was what was needed to educate themselves. As Malcolm X once uttered in one of his speeches, his alma mater was books, a good library, and he could spend the rest of his life reading, just satisfying his curiosity. Therefore, if their experiences were the inputs, the literature that the black people crafted was the output to release the souls of black people.

Reflections of Black Literature

Literature is one of the foremost arts forms through which people display their culture and experiences. In modern times, literature has become Africa's major 'gift' to the intellectual world since African Literature not only focuses on racial issues and problems but also on the problems of humanity. Either oral or written, African literature has gained world-wide recognition with such classics as the *Mandingo Epic of Sundiata*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child*, and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Nigeria's Wole Soyinka in 1986 and Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee of South Africa in 1991 and 2003 respectively has drawn further attention to the nature and the role of African literature in the intellectual world.

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Black intellectuals could understand the interconnection between their adaptive, parental cultures and the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment. Against the stark characterization of the western world, black intellectuals have chosen a very different operation in the integration of 'creolisation' and 'hybridity.' Having one white parent and a black parent, those of mixed race tried to find their place in society. By creating languages that originated from pidgins, they created new languages, hybrid cultures and entangled cultural habits. These habits caused new styles and the approach of literature. Defining ethnocentrism and the enquiry of whose values are being considered is an imperative query, as is the subject of where the tools, which will make this study conceivable, are going to come from. Black and diasporic cultural suggestions have altered challenges of the dogmatic focus on discrete nationalistic Caucasian dynamics, which have influenced European and American cultural thought. The strong relation between Europe's new strategies and American capitalism urged the shift and imbalance of some ideas.

First, Africans that were brought over the Atlantic to Europe and America of course did not come of their own free will. Neither did they come to spread their own culture or traditions and languages. For this reason, they tried to express their feelings through an adapted English, which they tried to use to communicate as best as they could.

Through this hybrid nation of language, they passed on what they remembered of their own cultures and combined it with what they witnessed on new soil, or created something totally new. All their narratives, legends, jokes, songs, rhymes, and sayings recorded a world in which they reacted to their circumstances through their natural instincts and pure humanistic emotions. They evolved imaginative ways of interacting with this new 'totally alien' and 'pragmatic' world. Moreover, early tales revealed especially capitalistic and brutally practised enslavement issues. In 1853 in *Clotel or The President's Daughter*, the first novel by an African American, William Wells Brown recorded one of the earliest documented rhymes:

The Big bee flies high,
The little bee make the honey;
The black folks makes the cotton
And the white folks gets the money. (Brown 1853: 74)

It was not only written literature that shaped this new culture but also blues structure affected it. In the 1920's, Langston Hughes, in addition to adapting the themes of blues, would adapt the AAB rhyme scheme of the genre as one of his primary literary structures. Therefore, compositions like his *Miss Blues'es Child* became common:

If the blues would let me,
Lord knows I would smile.
If the blues would let me,
I would smile, smile, smile, smile.
Instead of that I'm cryin'-
I must be Miss Blues'es child. (Hughes 1987: 113)

In addition to the blues, folk narratives also provided a shaping force for literary creativity. The structure of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is based on an African American folktale.

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Numerous writers drew upon the African American folk tradition for characters and concepts. ‘Badman’ heroes, for example, pervade the literature from Charles W. Chessnut’s *Josh Green in The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) to Apalachee Red in Raymond Andrew’s *Appalachee Red* (1978). Conjure women and the other healers modelled on characters from the folk tradition make their devout in Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), continuing through Chessnut’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899), get transformed in Alice Walker’s *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff* (1970), and emerge with true supernatural powers in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) as well as in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988). Other writers and works that have drawn upon this tradition of characterization include Charles R. Johnson, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (1980); and Tina McElroy Ansa, *Baby of the Family* (1989). Travelling bluesmen are the subject of Langston Hughes’s *Not without Laughter* (1930) and Albert Murray’s *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974). The man of words tradition, as exemplified in Muhammad Ali’s rhymes such as:

Float like a butterfly
Sting like a bee
That’s why they call me
Muhammed Ali,

joins the preaching tradition as the focus of such works as Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), where mastery of language is the measure of reputation and effectiveness in society. Other writers simply saturate their works with an aura of the folk tradition; these include Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), and Charles R. Johnson, *Middle Passage* (1990) (Azevedo 2005: 340-350).

The slave narrative tradition, in which the protagonist documents (in the first person) his or her movement from slavery to freedom and from South to North, defines the autobiographical tradition that so informs the literature as well as the archetypal pattern of movement for literary characters, that is, from bondage to freedom. Most probably, one of the best recognized slave narratives is Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, written by himself (1845), though Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860) have gained prominence in recent years. Although it is technically classified as the first novel written by an African American woman, Wilson’s *Our Nig* nonetheless documents the atrocities of enslavement; since the action is set in the Boston area, the book is especially interesting for supplying a look at slavery on other than southern soil.

In terms of the rise of Afro-American literary movement, it is worth mentioning to see the first newspaper prepared and published by Black Americans, *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827 to be named as *The Rights of All* in 1829. Other newspapers followed this: *The Weekly Advocate* (1837), *the Elevator* (1842), *Rising Sun* (1847), *North Star* (1847), the *Daily Creole* (1856) and in 1864 the *New Orleans Tribune* (Fisch & Reid-Pharr 2007: 139). Newspapers were the main catalyzers for the Afro-American voice to be heard and an essential part of further literary development. Literary expansion proved to be a pivotal change for Black movement to finally have the chance to illuminate their reaction to the rest of the world. Worth mentioning again, particularly in that era, William Wells Brown wrote the first Black American novel called *Clotel or the President’s Daughter* in 1853 (2007: 140). Being a romantic novel, *Clotel* is also a prevailing attack on the

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slave system and, specifically, the central treachery it characterized of humanity and the American dream. This was Brown's only extended work of fiction. However, Brown didn't stop to write and discover other forms. Being historical studies, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* published in 1862. Moreover, *The Negro in the American Rebellion* in 1867 and *The Rising Son or The Antecedents and Advancements of the Colored Race* in 1873 followed by his final work in 1880, *My Southern Home* (Gray 2012: 166).

While developing a solid literary reaction helped to the path of gaining not only intellectual but also a slow-motion economic power in terms of the Black voices turning into a dense Afro-American community bit by bit. Education and literacy could be possible through an economic evolution. In that sense, "Booker T Washington in *A New Negro for a New Century* was the first modern black political philosopher to read the lessons of the industrial revolution of late nineteenth-century America and conclude that the problem of the black citizen was not a matter of democracy, but a question of power" (Hutchinson & Stewart 2007: 14).

The major theme of slave narratives also found a counterpart in the other consciously created kind of works in this field. The progression from slavery or restriction (the South) to liberty and limitless opportunities (the North) provided a prevailing pattern in the literature. The Great Migration that led to the tripling and quadrupling of African American populations in various northern cities in 1900-1930 illustrates a historical pattern as well. Writers who have their characters leave the South for presumed opportunities in the North include Wright in *Big Boy Leaves Home* (1938), Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952), John Oliver Killens in *Youngblood* (1954), and a host of others.

Folklore and slave narratives, therefore, addressed the basic condition of black existence in the United States, the discrepancy between a theoretical democracy and the reality of the failure of democratic principles. As the genres of the written tradition developed, they in turn were conceptualized, especially in the early years of development, with the larger issues of black life and culture in mind. Brown's *Clotel*, for example, is as much a treatise against slavery as a novel. When Brown completed *The Escape, or, A Leap for Freedom* in 1858, that first drama by an African American also found its subject in slavery. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who published *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* in 1854, became a popular abolitionist lecturer, as did Brown. Her poems, such as *Bury Me in a Free Land* and *The Mother*, depict the consequences of slavery on the family life of African Americans.

In recent years, there has been a re-evaluation of what southern territory means in African American literature, and writers have set their works on that soil and allowed their characters to define themselves and their world in that previously restricting territory. Such writers and works include Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), in which a black woman who has been abused physically and psychologically overcomes these debilitations to become an entrepreneur in Memphis; and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), in which a descendant of slaves controls not only her family's destiny but the very elements of the universe. For these writers, the South is no longer a forbidden territory, or a place of death, but a place where African Americans can choose reasonably well under what circumstances they will live. Its roots in the oral tradition and in the African American slave narrative have enabled African American literature to come of age in the twentieth century. From a literature that made obeisance to white reading audiences, as was the case with Charles W. Chesnut, it has grown to insist, as Toni Morrison did, that readers come to

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meet it wherever it starts and agree to go wherever it takes them. Forms that were initially rooted in politics, such as Frances Harper's lyrics, gave way to the mythologically sophisticated verses of poets such as Jay Wright. In addition, dramas that were initially intended for living room consumption serve as the origins of works that have won several Pulitzer Prizes.

The publishing industry has kept pace with audiences for African American literature, and today novels, poems, and plays by black writers are available for use in courses in American Studies, African Studies, Religious Studies, History, and Sociology, as well as in the traditional English Department classes. Readership has transcended languages and national boundaries; Morrison's works, for example, are available in German and Japanese, among other languages, and she won Italy's highest prize for creative writing in 1990. Doctoral students in India, Spain, Germany, Japan and the Netherlands routinely come to the United States to study with specialists in African American literature, and they regularly write dissertations on African American writers. From a creative effort with a purpose, African American literature has grown to be recognized internationally as a richly complex area of study that will sustain many generations of students, teachers, and scholars. Toni Morrison describes *Beloved* as an exterior form with most of the formal constraints. These remarks expose a mutual step of uneasiness by means of the novel, and a common concern about its value as a supply in the communal developments that rule the reshaping and maintenance of historical reminiscence. The change between spoken and written culture and an answer to the supremacy of autobiographical writing of black literary creation might have been the very reason of such concerns. Toni Morrison describes these issues as:

My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or group that wrote it. The history of the novel as a form began when there was a new class, a middle class, to read it; it was an art form that they needed. The lower classes did not need novels at that time because they had an art form already: they had songs and dances, and ceremony and gossip and celebrations. The aristocracy did not need it because they had the art that they had patronized, they had their own pictures painted, their own houses built, and they made sure their art separated them from the rest of the world...For a long time, the art form that as healing for black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing and play it, it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take its place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed...now in a way that it was not needed before. (qtd. in Gilroy 2002: 219)

As the novel and other writing forms become universal, black music has become an irreplaceable form of music. Although the reflections in this article are mainly on literature and black music is a very vast field, the crucial effect and the echo of music on the modern era is significant. However, it should be reviewed as a separate work altogether.

Conclusion

The African understanding of literature and culture has affected American culture and literature deeply; yet, 'neither political nor economic structures of domination are still simply co-extensive with national borders' (Gilroy, 2002: 7). Since white perception and tolerance was not flexible enough to enjoy multiculturalism, the flames from the rebellion in south central Los Angeles

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smouldered in April of 1992. Few commentators recalled the saliency of W.E.B. DuBois's surprisingly accurate and amazingly prophetic comment that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line' (Du Bois, 2009: VII). Indeed, in Los Angeles and elsewhere, African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Hispanics, as well as large numbers of European Americans, took to the streets to show their displeasure with a system which promises to deliver the goods and services of the world's greatest democracy but often fails to do so for the vast majority of its population. Hence, the anger over the Rodney King verdict became a symbolic metaphor for the pent-up anger that millions of American citizens felt at the grossest miscarriage of justice from a system which neither serves, nor protects its basic interests. Thus, the 'dream' of Martin Luther King's stirring speech in August of 1963 resonates as a nightmare forty years later for most of black America. Although his exaltations were not in vain, the daily lives of African Americans in the economic, political and social spheres give grim testimony to the inconclusive struggles of the militants in the 1960s, the moderates of the 1970s, and the entrepreneurs of the 1980s. Indeed, the life and times of most African Americans in the 1990s reflect both a mythical paradise lost and the omnipresent feeling that progress has come to a standstill. If it were not for this nostalgia and agony reprised through black literature, the consequences of segregation and apartheid would have been more fearful today. As a matter of fact, all Black African experience from the savannahs of Africa to the cities of America has brought new dimensions, impetus and 'colour' to the American society.

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