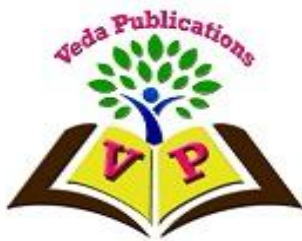


THE FEMINIST VOICES IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT



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Women's literature is the voice of a group of people who have remained oppressed, ignored and rejected by centuries of biased and vested political interests of the dominant males. The literacy of woman has led to a corresponding rise in the number of female readers and writers. It represents the single most important social, economic and aesthetic revolution of modern times.

Maya Angelou born as Marguerite Ann Johnson is an American author and poet. She belongs to the group of doubly marginalized people. She has to undergo not only the painful trauma of racism but also gender discrimination. *Still I Rise* is a standing example to show that Maya Angelou is a typical feminist. The poet pours out her grievances and ends positively that she would rise above all the testing times.

Keywords: *African American Literature, Harlem Renaissance, Feminism, Black Community.*

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African American literature is produced in the United States by the writers of African descent. It has its history of origin way back in the late eighteenth century. The slave narrative of the nineteenth century had its own auto biographical elements of spiritualism. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's was indeed an awakening in the real sense. It was a time of blossoming of arts and literature. During this time, the African American writers were duly recognised and rewarded with laurels. The dominant themes and much discussed issues in this literature are African American culture, racism, slavery and equality. The acceptance of their writing boosted the confidence of the African American writers and made them voice forth their grievances in a more emphatic manner.

The advent of the 20th century gave a different colouring to the African American literature. The non fiction works by authors like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker.T.Washington were in a dilemma whether to confront or to appease the prevailing racist attitudes in the United States. But writers like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks utilised the period of American Civil Rights movement as the favourable time to write on issues like racial segregation and Black Nationalism. African American literature has seen its dawn and it has risen to greater heights to emit shining and bright light. The Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and Toni Marrison's *Beloved* are standing examples.

The general focus of African American literature was on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American. This literature not only explores the issues of freedom and equality that has long been denied to the Blacks in the United States but also concentrates on themes such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, a sense of belonging, segregation, migration and feminism. This literature presents the individual's life and experience from an African American point of view. Infact, the early African American literature represented a way for free blacks to negotiate their new identity in an individualized republic. Thus, the early theme of this literature was about what it meant to be a citizen in post – revolutionary America.

The poet Phillis Wheatley (1753-84) published her book *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773, three years before the independence of America. Wheatley was not only the first African American to publish a book but also the first to achieve international fame as a writer. She was born in Senegal and was sold into slavery at the mere age of seven. She was brought to America and owned by a Boston merchant. By the time she was sixteen, she developed a command over her new language of English. Her poems became recognised and noteworthy personalities appreciated her talent. George Washington was happy to thank her for her poem written in his honour. Of course, as a coin has two sides, there was an objection from some of the whites who were reluctant to believe that such refined poetry could come from the mouth of a black especially a woman. Wheatley had to defend herself in court to prove that she had written her work and her successful defense was the stepping stone to African American literature.

Slave narrative is a genre of African American literature that developed in the middle of the 19th century. It is an account written by fugitive slaves about the hardships that they had to undergo in the south and often, after escaping to freedom. They wanted to bring to limelight the cruelties of life under slavery. At the same time, the consistent humane quality of the slaves was also projected. Harriet Bercher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is a novel which reflects the abolitionist view of the evils of slavery.

The slave narrations were significant to African American literature. Several slaves from North America and the Caribbean wrote account of their sufferings. The slave narratives have three broad classifications: stories of religious redemption, stories to inspire the abolitionist struggle and tales of progress. The ones written to inspire the abolition struggle are the most famous because they are all autobiographical and hence first hand information. The autobiography of Fredrick Douglass and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Civil* (1861) by Harriot Jacobs are recognized as the most famous of the 19th century writings by African Americans.

Jacobs (1813 – 1897) was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina. She was the first woman to



author a slave narrative in the United States. Her work *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* was written under the pseudonym 'Linda Brent'. Her narrative gives a detailed account of her struggle for freedom not only for herself but also for her two children. Her work holds an important place in the history of African American literature for it is first hand information of the social and special injustices that the black woman suffered under slavery.

Early African American spiritual autobiographies were published in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The spiritual narratives were important predecessors of the slave narratives which proliferated the literary scene of the 19th century. These spiritual narratives have often been conveniently left out of the study of African American literature because some scholars considered them as historical or sociological documents though it was a source of importance in understanding the African American literature as a whole.

African American women who wrote spiritual narratives had to compromise the dangerous positions of being black as well as women in early America. Women asserted their authority and rights to preach and write spiritual narratives. Their writings are very important to the understanding of African American life in the Antebellum North because they could offer both historical context and literary tropes. These women writers had clear cut knowledge of literary genres and biblical narratives. This in turn countered the dominant racist and sexist discourse of early American society.

Maria W. Stewart published a collection of her religious writings with a tinge of autobiographical elements in 1879 known as *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*. She also published two more works titled as *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* (1831) and *Meditations* (1832). Maria gave many public speeches where she talked about the role of black women and race relations. Her works laid a special focus on the plight of African Americans in America during the period.

The Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940 was a flowering of African American literature and art. There were numerous black artists, musicians and others who produced classic works in various fields from jazz to theatre; the renaissance is

renowned for the literature that came out of it. This marked a turning point for African American literature. Earlier the books written by African Americans were only read by other blacks. But, now this literature began to be absorbed into the mainstream American culture.

Beginning in the 1970's the books written by the black writers continuously achieved best selling and award winning status. The works of the African Americans began to be accepted by the academia as a legitimate genre of American literature. A number of scholars and writers helped to promote and define African American literature as a genre during this period of time, including fiction writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and poet James Emanuel.

The advent of the twentieth century has witnessed changes in almost every aspect of the day-to-day lives of women, right from the domestic circle to the public. Various women's movements have laid emphasis on the advocacy of equal rights. Women in the early twentieth century have been more active and influential as writers. There is also an increase in the projection of feminine images and themes in literature.

Women's literature is the voice of a group of people who have remained oppressed, ignored and rejected by centuries of biased and vested political interests of the dominant males. They have always been keen to reduce womanhood in typical characteristics of inadequacy, impurity, frailty and eternal silence. But they often forget that women are the creators of their self and an imaginative being of their discourse is a subversion of their silence.

The literacy of woman has led to a corresponding rise in the number of female readers and writers. Feminism has given rise to the gradual development of female writings. It represents the single most important social, economic and aesthetic revolution of modern times. It is seriously concerned with the marginalisation of women and protests against patriarchy. It is a social movement which seeks an equal right for women ensuring them equal status with men and freedom to choose their own careers and decide their life patterns.

Maya Angelou born as Marguerite Ann Johnson is an American author and poet. She has published six autobiographies, five books of essays,



several books of poetry, and is credited with a list of plays, movies and television shows spanning more than fifty years. She has received dozens of awards and over thirty honorary doctoral degrees. Maya belongs to the group of doubly marginalised people. She had to undergo not only the painful trauma of racialism but also gender discrimination. One can see the vehemence against her oppressors in her poems.

Still I Rise is a standing example to show that Maya Angelou is a typical feminist. All her pent up angry emotions for being suppressed is given vent to in the poem. Her very opening lines seem to ignite the fire:

“You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise”.

The poet is very confident that her black community will definitely come to the forefront of the society. The more and more the others try to push the blacks down, they will emerge out successfully claiming their emancipation. The poet uses the metamorphical images of the sun, moon and tides of the ocean. The setting sun does not mean it will not rise again the next day; the waning moon will once again begin from a crescent. The tides of the oceans are eternal and have no end. So will be the rise of the Africans:

“Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes spinning high,
Still I rise.”

The poet is upset for being looked down upon just for the mere reason she being a woman. Her bitter anguish expressed for being gender discriminated is well explicit in her poetic lines. Her intelligence and her brilliant works that literally supersedes the male writers could not be accepted and digested by the patriarchal society. Maya is very proud to be a woman and sometimes her expressions are a little pornographic but yet it only underlines her emotions of anger:

“Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

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Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I’ve got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?’

Maya represents the African community. She compares herself to a black ocean which is wide and can leap to great heights. She cannot forget her trials and tribulations which leaves behind in her memory “Nights of terror and fear”. Yet above all this, she is the “dream and hope of the slave”. Thus in this poem, she reflects her grievances and ends positively that she would rise above all this testing times. True to the saying of Swami Vivekananda, “Awake, arise and stop not till the goal is reached,” Maya Angelou fought for her freedom and attained it with flying colours. She as a woman has become a prominent figure in the American literature society and she was called upon to recite her poem, *On the Pulse of Morning* at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in January 1993. The female bird whose feathers were initially cut by the patriarchal society has indeed struggled hard for the growth of her plumes and finally soared high in the sky.

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