CHAPTER - I

AFRO-AMERICAN NOVEL
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Any effort to estimate Negro writers or more exactly termed as Afro-American writers of various branches will be a feat. However, a summary of Negro novel is attempted here with a special focus on Ralph Ellison. Afro-American writing (a sophisticated, labelling for racial differentiation) is of hope (Ex. Up from Slavery) if it is simplistic, and of despair when it is oracular (Ex. The Souls of Black Hope).

The whole of Afro-American writing can be broadly divided into four periods: (1) Literature upto Civil War which consists of writings of slave culture as it is an expression of suffering, affirmation of manhood in the quest of freedom. (2) From the Civil War to World War-I - Literature of newly freed citizens and their struggle for indentity. (3) In between the two world wars - which saw the first flowering of Afro-American literature as high art -- Harlem Renaissance and its immediate decendents. (4) From the mid-forties
to present -- from protest to the black arts movements. New forms, expanded usage of language, are to be seen as the quest for identity changes to self-discovery.

It is interesting to note that the early negro writings do have all those much harped upon themes -- protest, inter racial love, proud assertion of race, of later novels. Afro-American writing may be studied period-wise as detailed here.

**Upto Civil War:**

Though it is an age of poets in black like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, fiction too started shooting-up roots. Charles W. Chesnutt had novel to his credit though he is a poet first. He resembles Dunbar in his short stories regarding the theme but he is better than the latter. He wrote about life in South and the racial problems. He did not glorify the past as others did. David Walker's *The Appeal*, Frederic Doughlas' *My Bondage and My Freedom*, *Life and Time of Frederic Douglas*, Samuel Ward's
A Fugitive Slave, Frances Harper's Iola Leroy, William Wells Brown's Clotel or The President's Daughter, Gustavas Vassa's The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Gustavas Vassa come in this period.

Though beginners, these novelists dealt with different themes in their novels. "Chesnutt explored colour bias (A Matter of Principles), folk Negro psychology (The Goophered Grape Vine), subtle racist injuries (The Boquet) and brutality in Southern life (The Sheriff's Children) in his tales while Dunbar on the other hand yielded more steadily to the restrictions of the plantation tradition producing stories like Anne Lizer's Stumbling Block, Aunt Jempe's Triumph. He widened his themes however in such tales as The Lynching of Jube Benson, Scapegoat (about the Negro Leadership), At Shaft 11 (about a mining strike) The Ordeal of Mt. Hope (about industrial education in small town)."¹ These successful writers established the tradition for story writing. "Almost twenty other authors wrote early novels. The first Clotel or The

Thus the slave narrative reached its full zenith 20 years or so before the Civil War. Many of them as aforesaid were autobiographies in which the hero won his freedom through great hardship. Work is a partial solution to the hardships of slavery as it is the gateway for his freedom. One can see a struggle for identity
though a different one from later identity crisis. The identity of the hero is around the desire for freedom. Education is important as it enables him to see the image of his true self, a self different from that given by his master. The identity of slave narrators arises, as a result of racial oppression. The struggle thus becomes personal and political. Their language is flavoured by sermons, and their Christian perspective and their culture. The slave writers had their White Masters as models in literature as they were left with no choice. But they retained their originality by transforming the white material into something fresh and beautiful by their unique culture - a culture of two divergent, strong currents - African and American. Thus the language may be their masters' but it is coloured by their far off once native place.

Yet one can agree that the Negro writer is of a recent origin and what all that is achieved between Phillis Wheatley to Paul Laurance Dunbar is negligible because the development of fiction among the Negro authors has been one of the repressed activities: The
writers are forced to be stereotype without which they cannot impress the white readers. "The exaltation of the Negro self was forced into self-conscious and mechanical conformity to the folk tradition of "darkey entertainment" which Whites found so irresistible. Thus a Negro Character like Black Samson of Brandy Wine could be ever so heroic and noble as long as he "talked nigger" and was ignorant of what nobility meant. Thus too the loftiest precepts could fall from the lips of a black woman, so long as she was in the white folks kitchen and spoke her maxims in dialect." Negroid writers were confined to "Literary Ghetto", a noman's land (Leroi Jones) ... almost completely invisible to white America. He was forced to be someone else, live a life of somebody's choosing, and the reality he shares will differ from the reality conceived by the white. To cast light on this Willful darkness is to destroy the superfluous reality.

Chesnutt's novel falls short of his short stories, in facility and power. His two novels The Marrow of Tradition, The House Behind Cedars are representative period novels. The first is more a political tract
and only the latter is real novel. One may sound harsh but one can endorse the statement by Leroi Jones "The embarrassing and inverted paternalism of Charles W. Chesnutt and his refined Afro-American heroes are far cries from the richness and profundity of the blues."  

Traditional concepts demanded either obedience guaranteeing successes (ex. Dunbar) or a denial resulting in silence (ex. Chesnutt).

It meant that a writer must adhere to older forms and concepts, if he wished for an audience. "It meant that he must work within the limitation of the concept or ignore his racial kinship altogether and leave unsounded the profoundest depths of the peculiar experiences which were his by reason of his race."  

Civil War to World War-I:

This period has envisaged a new change as some Negro writers were protesting against the restrictions.

"After about 1902 indifference began to crystallize
into opposition to the culture-conscious, race-conscious Negro seeking honest answers to honest questions. It was opposition to the Negro's democratic ambitions which were just then beginning to burgeon. It was opposition to the Negro who was weary of his role of clown, scapegoat, doormat. And it was of course opposition to the Negro writer who was honest and sincere and anxious beyond the bounds of superimposed racial polity. It was a time of toil, trouble, disillusion, despair. Along with gentility, morality, wealth, there was a dark reality. There were robber barons, and violence. By this time Booker T. Washington was a much acclaimed leader (of course for white American) and had his own followers, who wrote in lines of compromise. The writers included stereotype of happy contented Negro (may not be a slave) who knows his place and accepts it happily. Only the bad Negro rebelled and much to his own misery. But real talented Negro writers under the leadership of William Stanley Braithwaite (The Canadian, Going Over Tindel, etc.) fought against this established notion.
W.E.B. DuBois freed the writers of Washington's conciliatory stand by two novels *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, *Dark Princess* and by a number of essays. Kelly Miller with her, *Out of the House of Bondage* and John Hope joined this line of protest. Even James Weldon Johnson left his apostasy and joined the battling group with his novel, *The Autobiography of an Excoloured Man*. Booker T. Washington has captured the White audience by his servile humility and many writers fell silent who could not follow his line. Jay Sanders Reddings writes: "Many but not all. There were stubborn souls and courageous and the frankly mad among them. There was the *Boston Guardian* and the *Chicago Defender* and the Atlanta University pamphlets and the souls of Black folks, finally the crisis. And this latter quickly developed a voice of multi-range and many tones. It roared like a lion, cooed like a dove, screamed like a puppy and laughed like a hyena. And always it protested. Always the sounds it made were the sound of revolt in the jungle and the protestation and revolt were becoming -
forgive me for changing my figure - powerful reagents in the social chemistry that produced the New Negro. Thus the new era of New Negro.⁷

World War-I and World War-II:

This period has seen diverse, myriad writers and the period can best be called as period of Harlem Renaissance. It can as well be called as the Jazz Age, Roaring twenties. It is a period of individual crisis. It is a period of frolic and fun and also a frustration. They are given four freedoms. They are free of Want, to Worship, to speak and free of fear. It was a beginning of artistic consciousness, artistic detachment. The new Negro started protesting against the gross injustice. "But a renewed sense of self respect was forcing the Negro to look at himself afresh to reject stereotype insist on integrity of race and personality."⁸

Naturally, fiction (literature for that matter) being the reflection of the society, imbibed this
undaunted energy and tremendous impetus from the renaissance. "Traditional fictional view of Negro was made obsolete by these changes. Only the most obtuse sentimental could continue to find aunties, uncles, uncle Toms and Race building was forcing the Negro to reject old assumptions, images. The New Negro was an assertion of America. He must free himself from the fiction of his past and redefine himself. His task was to discover and to define his culture, his contribution to what has been called as a white civilization."\(^9\)

This has put him in a fix. Either he, shameful of his past, abandoned his class and tried to be with the white who never welcomed him as he is, or he turned to his folk, his culture with gusto and sought his heaven in communism, away from his country America not knowing that he cannot be away from her as he is American first. However, black literature has passed its adolescence. Claude Meckay, Jean Toomar fell into the first half whereas Countee Cullers, Langston Hughes, Nellar Larson, George Schuyler, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston,
into second half. Makey's *Banjo, Banana Bottom* present a folk non-intellectual pan-Africanist vision of the world and his *A Long Way from Home* an autobiography marks his alienation with his fellow black literary companions, an example of aforesaid crisis in which black intellectuals fail to assimilate with their own race. *Jean Toomer's Cane* defies any classification. "Finally in Jean Toomer, the author of *Cane* we come upon the very first artist of the race who with all artists' passion and sympathy for life, its hurts, its sympathies, its desires, its joy, its defeats, strange yearnings can write about Negro without surrender or compromise of the artist's vision. So, objective is it that we feel that its a mere accident that birth or association has thrown him into contact with the life he has written about. He would write just as well as poignantly just as transmutingly about the peasants of Russia or the peasants of Ireland had experience brought him in touch with their existence. *Cane* is a book of Gold and Bronze, dusk and flame, of ecstacy
and pain and Jean Toomer is a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature."^10

Rudolf Fisher joined the group with his Walls of Jericho and The Conjure Man Dies whereas Langston Hughes depicted the black life with deep insight, compassion with wonderful richness. Arna Bontemps is the most race-conscious of all writers in twenties. (God Sends Sunday, Black Thunder, Drums at Dusk, Popo and Fifina, Children of Haiti). God Sends Sunday is in the mode of fast living, fighting. Black Thunder is based on a Negro insurrection, Zora Neal Hurston was immensely influenced by New Negro pride. "Her intense interest in black folklore is seen in her works Mules and Men, Tell My Horses and in her novels, Jonah's Gourd Wine, Their eyes Were Watching God, Seraph on the Suwanee."^11 Nella Larsen's novel is not in the main stream of Renaissance writing. She joins Chesnut, Jessie R Fauset, Dorothy West.

Harlem Renaissance was drawing to a close by 1929. The glorious 1920s were over. Black writing dwindled
during thirties though serious writers were still to pen. The aforesaid period produced no stereotypes as the next major period that began by 1960s. Writers of this period belonged to various backgrounds, and they are dedicated artists detached in observation and artistic in their works. There was a resurgence of Negro nationalism. The Negro started asking probing questions for which he wanted honest answers. They were violently abused this time even in spite of being free but the very treatment in a way nourished their faith, creative urge, thus giving them a deeper vision of the world if not a broader one, and gave them a sense of commitment. Talent added to this, the Negro writer emerged as a far better one than his White counterpart ever expected. His awareness of dignity and beauty was enriched by his culture. The lost generation is enlivened in Harlem. The writer insisted that Negro belonged to America and he belongs to her on his work.
The revolt against repression, babittry gained its ground. Its realized "colour, music, gusto the free expression of gay or desperate moods could best be filled by the exploration of Negro life and Character." Yet the Negro writers too were caught in the web, and yielded to the newly accepted stereo types. Most of them are forced to be aesthetic hedonists and even Claude Meckay, Redolf Fisher joined the line. "The Harlemites that emerged from the pages of novels of both White and Negro authors in this period were exotic primitives whose dances - The Charleston, the "black bottom", "the snakelips", the "Walking the dog" - were tribal rituals; whose music with wa-wa trumpets and trombones and drum batteries doubled for tom-toms, whose chorus girls with bunches of bananas girding their shapely middles nurtured tourists delusions of the "Congo creeting the black." Joie de vivre was a racial monopoly; rhythm and gaiety were one side - the darker of the racial line. "Thats why the darkies were bom" Sang Negro Jazz musician who should have known better." "The whites have only money, privilege, power; Negroes
have cornered the joy” was the theme of a Negro novelist, who did know better.” But Dubois' Dark Princess Walton White's, Fire in the Flint, Fight, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen resented this either self pitying or self applauding attitude of Negro. Toomer's 'Cane' explored the Negro life in deep south, and it is a book its par excellence.

Till Forties:

Negro renaissance ended by 1929. The abrupt end of Harlem Renaissance proves that it is not a mass movement. In the years between the end of it and till the advent of Richard Wright some really talented black writers were producing real good books. Writers like Ellison, Henry B. Jones, Maria Minus Ted Poston, Lawrence D. Reddick and Grace W. Thompkins published their first short stories.

1940 to 1960 and later:

1940 is the epoch making period in Black writing. Native Son, the first protest novel by Richard Wright
appeared in that year which was a trend setter, and which dominated the field for a long time compelling the writers either to follow it or fade into insignificance. It is the period of frustration, violence and confusion. It is an age of struggle, corruption and crime. The blacks are a changed lot. The Negro is exploring the truths about his dual identities, his real status in his country and the democracy itself. He is in search of his real identity. The awareness of his cultural superiority enabled him to come out of his previous obsession with whiteness. Its a transitional period for the Negro in which he is discarding the assumed or asserted old self and trying to establish his real identity. He is in search of his self, a self that is different from what the Whites gave. "We find a pervasive anguishied groping for identity that is no longer provided by the categories of fugitive slave in resistance to the tyrannical slave holders."\textsuperscript{14} The assertion of identity has resulted in identity crisis in which the writer in
his trials of establishing identity will be a loser in one way or the other. His identity as a black alienates him from white or his Americanness estranges him with fellow blacks. Search and discovery of real self is of utmost importance to them and almost all of them assault the racism. It is no more a question of what but how to resist and each one tried in a way he believed, rendering the questions more complicated. Some of them embraced communism and some opted segregation aligning themselves with Africans omitting the fact that they are Americans first. Whatever their faith, like their predecessors they all uphold education, work retaliation, group loyalty. His efforts at asserting his black identity invariably puts him at loggerheads with the spirit of nationalism. His is a hazardous experience as he must find his roots in a country where he is invisible. He is a pariah in his own country humbled into wearing a mask.

And the ground is so prepared that Wright's protesting immediately took roots. Wright struck the
stereotype by presenting an anguished, frustrated, forsaken hero no doubt a stereotype but presented in a different angle. No doubt that his hero is a menace to the society but society has given birth to him. He is driven to this disaster by the relentless society that does not grant him his much desired recognition. Immediately writers grabbed this example and for a long period Wright was treated as the Godfather, a model. "The writers of this school are Chester Himes (If He Hollers Let Him Go), (Lonely Crusade), Ann Petry (The Street) Curts Lucas (Third Ward New York), Willard Savoy (Alien Land) Philip Bkaye (Taffy) Loyod Brown (Iron City), William Attawary (Blood on the Forge) Willard Motley (Knock on Any Door) Nathern Heard (Howard Street)."^{15}

Wright school looked at literature as an emotional catharsis. Their creations are cry of despair and anguish. They are on the verge of naturalism as they faithfully give accurate pictures; and try to probe
the psychology. Yet their style is crude, much of their works look like treatises of sociology, pamphlets of propaganda.

By 'fifties Wright's school ended. 'Fifties are for integration, assimilation. It has seen Black fiction of highest order, greatest artistry. By 1948 Dorothy West had her novel *The Living is Easy* published. James Baldwin was ready with his *Go Tell it on The Mountain* and Gwendolyn published *Maud Martha*; and Ralph Ellison is on the map with his beautiful short stories and *Invisible Man*. During this period black novelists were more active than the poets. Zora Neal's *Seraph on the Suwanee*, William Gardner Smith's *Last of the Conquerors*, William Denby's *Bettle Creek*, Owen Dodson's *Boy at the Window*, fall into this group.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* began a new line of approach. It anticipates the passionate probing of blackness of next two decades. 'Fifties once again turned to self-examination. Negroes were moving
towards full participation in every phase of American Life. And hence no more of protest. Most of those who wrote protest novels soon switched over to assimilation. Protest and assimilation are two sides of the same coin. Both are propaganda novels. But their aim was to provide a wider base to Negro art. "Faced with the loss of his oldest and most cherished tradition the Negro writer was forced to seek fresh ways to use his material. First of all he attempted to find new themes within the racial framework. Retaining the Negro character and background he shifted his emphasis from the protest aspect of Negro living and placed it on the problems and conflicts within the group itself."¹⁶ Examples include Chester Hime's, Third Generation Owen Dodson's Boy at the Window, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maud Martha. The stress was on life within the group. Novels like The Outsider, Sweet Fly Paper of Life, never touched inter-racial protest. Some never had any Negro characters at all. Ex. Anger at Innocence, Knock on Any Door. Integration
movement made the writers to avoid protest, Negro characters (if possible) and look for new themes.

Whereas 'sixties can be called as neo-protest, and this time of course, a militant protest. Some of the novels like The Long Dream of Richard Wright, Trumbull Park of Frank London Brown are like those of 'forties. Jazz musician is given great importance that is hitherto never given by the black writers. John A. William's Night Song, Kellye's A drop of Patience, Baldwin's Another Country are the examples. Black attitude to whites range from pity, contempt, love, hate. American middle class is repudiated; Jazz is glorified. There is a lot of uncertainty about the race relation. Black writers began to feel the psychological, emotional barriers, different from whites. White man's joy is their anger, his despair is their hope. His freedom was their slavery. And here lies all the difference. The Negro writers asserted that "Their fight is not to be white in black
skin, but to inject some black blood, intelligence, black humanness into pallid main stream of American life - culturally, socially, psychologically."\textsuperscript{17} The fight is not for racial sameness but for racial equality. They no longer look at the whites for their identity. They would like to warn the whites that if they are invisible to whites its dangerous only to whites and for nobody else. James Baldwin's \textit{Go Tell it On the Mountain}, Martin Luther King Jr. \textit{Stride towards freedom}, The \textit{Montgomery Story}, Malcolm Marshall X Speeches, \textit{Autobiography}, and Mari Evans, \textit{Where is all the Music}, \textit{I am a Black Woman}, Leroi Jones, \textit{A Good Girl is Hard to Find} take up this same.

Negro novel has become a great potent weapon. Its nothing exaggerating if one says, "The white writer seems to stand baffled before the enigma and so he expends all his energies on dialect and in general on the Negro's ministrel characteristics. We shall have to look to the Negro, have to look to the
Negro himself to go all the way. No whiteman can do it. Its white psychology will always be in his way. The Negro novelist must reveal to us much more than what a Negro thinks about when he is tied to a stake, and the torch is being applied to his flesh, much more than what he feels when he is being drowned off the sidewalk by drunken rowdy who may be his intellectual inferior by a thousand leagues. Such a writer should forget that there are white readers. He would have to lose his self consciousness and hence the sea change in Afro-American writings....

2. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


17. Anthology of black literature - (period of Rebirth in Black Autobiography in America.)