CHAPTER – 1

African American Women Writers of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century

The twentieth century has been an epoch making era for the African American literary tradition because of the significant contributions made by African American women writers during this century. The works of these African American women writers is invaluable.

African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and many others have rewritten the existing literary traditions by expressing themselves and creating a deep impact on the African American, literary arena. The works of these women writers reverberate with self-expression, thus achieving a canonical status and enriching not only African American but also the American literary world. These writers write not only about themselves, but also about African American women.

Commenting on African American women writers, Mary Helen Washington writes:

When I think of how essentially alone black women have been—all alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control; alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realize that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life. Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers,
there are more models of how it is possible for us to live, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us. (ix-xxii)

The twentieth century has been a period of intense literary activity for African American women writers. It was a time when for the first time these talented writers started to write and express their creative genius. According to Traylor:

It explores first the interiority of an in-the-head, in the heart, in the gut region of a discovery called the self. It tests the desires, the longings, the aspirations of this discovered self with and against its possibilities for respect, growth, fulfillment, and accomplishments.

(71)

These women writers started to express themselves truly and freely for the first time. Their works became their manifesto. Their works undoubtedly portray their growth, struggle and accomplishment. The twentieth century women writers have explored every possible genre of literature: fiction, nonfiction, formal, informal, poetry, stories, essays, autobiographies and others. They have chartered unknown territories and set a new unprecedented trend.

African American women writers have given readers powerful insights into grim issues such as race, gender and class, but before one makes a deep inquiry into the works of these women writers, it is highly essential to know about their past. To quote Margaret Walker:

It is necessary as always when approaching Afro-American literature in any form—poetry, prose, fiction, or drama—to give a background of the socioeconomics and political forces and the historical context before proceeding to a literary analysis or synthesis. Then we will have
the necessary tools with which to examine the strange phenomena found in American and Afro-American literature. (Tate 202)

African American women writers have a unique but grim past. Their ancestors were plucked out from the continent of Africa and brought in America as slaves. African men and women were tortured, brutalized, oppressed and exploited beyond imagination. Arriving in America, these African men, women and children were systematically and legally robbed of their humanity (Baker 2). However, the system of slavery proved even more brutal for African women. They were robbed of their respect, dignity and identity. They faced violence at the hands of their white masters not only in the form of hard labour and whipping lashes but also became an unwanted victim of sexual abuse. These women were often raped by their white masters and their children sold away by them. Harihar Kulkarni writes in this context:

The brutal treatment that the black women received during slavery invariably left profound scars on their psyche. Their physical bondage ultimately turned into a psychological bondage causing mutation and mutilations of their world. The external forces operating at the socio-economic levels came to bear an unmistakable relationship to the internal fears, worries, anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and frustration. The poisonous fangs of slavery manifested themselves in innumerable ways and finally determined the behavioral pattern of black women. (59)

The American chattel slavery system had a devastating effect on a black woman’s body as well as her psyche. This system worked through socialization, violence and objectification and in unified effect damaged black woman’s self-
identity and consciousness (Kulkarni 62). Explaining this 'objectification' of African American women, Harihar Kulkarni writes:

The peculiar institution that exploited black women for productive and reproductive ends viewed them not as human beings but as mere objects. The black woman was not a person but a thing—a thing whose personality had no claim to basic human dignity. She was a house hold drudge, a means of getting distasteful work done. She was an animated agricultural implement to augment the services of mules and plows in cultivating and harvesting cane and cotton crop. Then she was a breeding machine, a producer of human livestock, and potential laborers, who on being bred and brought up, would be lynched, flogged, branded and even murdered at the will and pleasure of the master. (57)

This objectification of African American people especially that of African American women had a devastating effect on them. It affected them at various levels: physical, mental, moral as well as intellectual. In this way the black people were negated to mere human transferable capital, and dubbed as inferior and debased. In these testing times, black women tried to keep themselves, their children and whatever they could hold on to alive. While silently suffering the horrors of slavery, African American women tried their best to maintain their self-respect and self-identity.

Right from the days of slavery to the present, African American women have been facing the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classicism. Maya Angelou vehemently talks of the the position of African American woman, “caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of
power” (65). These African American women face racism from whites, both men and women; gender discrimination, both by whites as well as their African American men; and classicism in the form of being economically disabled and placed on the lowest rung of society. Gloria Wade Gayles aptly describes the precarious position of African American women:

American is an oppressive system that divides people into groups on the basis of their race, sex and class, creating a society in which a few have capital and therefore are able to influence the lives of many. There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerless. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. (3-4)

It is the black women who have always been at the brink of society and at the receiving end of every kind of oppression. Investigating into the past, one can clearly observe that African American women have been inscribed into a process of oppression and exploitation resulting in a particular codification of these women. According to Patricia Collins, women’s existence is structured along three interdependent dimensions which all operate through oppression—economy, polity and ideology. Society has often used economy as a means to force black women into all-consuming activity so that they have almost no or very few opportunities to do any kind of intellectual work. Similarly through the dimension of polity, black women
have often been excluded of rights and privileges which are readily available to male citizens. Finally, ideology represents the process by which black women have often been associated with certain qualities and it is used to justify the ongoing oppression (6-7).

Thus, one sees that American society has triply disempowered and disenfranchised African American women. Among these three oppressions, racism is the most powerful oppression, which African American women have been facing. It started with them being brought as slaves and continues till now. African American people have often been hated and degraded because of their black skin colour. Sidney W. Mints writes in this context:

The word “slave” still brings the visual image of blackness to North American minds. This association of forced labor and degradation with peoples of a particular physical type is a powerful symbol of the extent to which social perceptions are historically conditioned. (34)

In historical records, slavery in the United States of America ended after the Civil War with the commencement of the thirteenth Amendment. However, racism still continues in American society in one form or the other. The enslavement of African American people into chattel slavery, the next hundred years of raping of African American women, lynching and mutilating of both black men and women, has had a deep effect on African American people. They have been living the life of “invisible”.

African American women bore the brunt of racism to the extreme. They were dubbed as “niggers” and “black bitches”. In a racist white society, African American women became the epitome of ugliness and abhorrence, while white women were considered a symbol of purity. According to Thomas S. Szase, “Americans have used
this blackness and madness as their standards and transcendent symbols of evil, and
whiteness and sanity as their standards and transcendent symbols of good”(68). Being
African American in descent has put these women into a more subjugated position
and cast them in a more inferior position than the black men. On the basis of race and
their skin colour African American women have been systematically incarcerated
from every positive aspect of life.

African American women’s plight does not end with the oppression of racism, she faces yet another kind of brutal oppression based on gender that is, sexism. She
not only leads the life of black but also a woman, and thus, she is in a double
disadvantaged position of being black and a woman in a white American patriarchal society. Lorraine Bethel writes explaining the subjugated position of the African American woman owing to her colour and gender:

Black women embody by their sheer physical presence two of the most
hated identities in this racist/sexist country. Whiteness and maleness in
this culture have not only been seen as physical identities but codified
into states of being and world views. The codification of Blackness and
femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms “thinking
like a woman” and “acting like a nigger”, both based on the premise
that these are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and
thinking. Therefore the most pejorative concept in the white male
world view would be thinking and acting like a “nigger woman”. (178)

The sexism and its oppression started simultaneously with racism for black women when they were enslaved. They were made to work along with black men in
plantations, but also were sexually abused by their white masters. Besides hard labour
in the day, they became sex objects for white slave masters in the night. They were
rampantly raped and forced to procreate a new breed of slaves which were to be sold off. Even after gaining freedom, African American women have been often raped and their modesty outraged by white men.

Equally disturbing is the sexist oppression by African American men. The assumptions of phallic superiority of African American men had a debilitating effect on African American women’s psyche. These black men not only oppressed their black women, but also hankered after white beauty ideals. It is apt to quote Eldridge Cleaver, a black leader:

I love white women and hate black women. I’d jump over ten nigger bitches just to get one white woman.... A white woman is beautiful, even if she is bald-headed and only has one tooth.... There is softness about white woman, something delicate and soft inside. But a nigger bitch seems to be full of steel granite hard and resisting, not soft and submissive like a white women. Ain’t nothing more beautiful than a white woman’s hair.... She is like a goddess, a symbol. (159)

Though black men have always been fighting against oppression, they themselves have been tyrannical towards their own women folks. African American women have been raped beaten, disparaged, hated, and mutilated by African American men with the same intensity as white males. African American men have always held their view that all the oppression by the whites has crippled them but not the femininity of black women. Bell Hooks writes:

Although black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era, black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values. As black men advanced in
all spheres of American life—they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role. (4)

Thus, an African American woman is caught between crossfires of racism and sexism and bears the oppression from both white as well as black men. She finds herself pushed to the brink. Just as she has been affected by racism, similarly she is also crippled by sexism. Just as white men have exploited her, so have black men.

African American women also suffer from classicism. They are the least privileged compared to white males, white women and African American males. They are positioned on the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder. Right form the days of slavery, though she has been working equally alongside black males, but she is considered as the least deserving. Harihar Kulkarni aptly describes in the following passage how African American women have been systematically economically robbed and suppressed:

The American slavery that was basically embedded in capitalistic ideals exploited black women as an essential part of labor force. The economics of slavery forced black woman into a precarious situation. As a black, she was exploited for her skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops, as a woman she was also asked to perform a reproductive role vital to the planter’s financial interest and to the interest of the expansive system of slavery in general. The slave owner or the planter often took a more crudely opportunistic approach towards the labor of slave women....He exploited his bondswomen not only on the fields for cutting canes, and picking cotton but also for washing, ironing, or working in the house. The slave owner’s practice of using black women as the active agents of a labor force and
reserving certain tasks for women exclusively demonstrated how
patriarchal and capitalistic assumptions concerning black women’s
work could reinforce each other. (57)

African American women have been taking care of their children, their family
and are an integral part of the African American social milieu, but she is the most
ignored class. She has less of everything that would make half for a decent life.
Thus, they are economically downtrodden and in the most vulnerable position, and
live the life of invisible citizens in America.

While triple oppression is clearly evident and has marred African American
women’s lives, some critics are not satisfied with this ‘triple oppression’ theory. They
often believe that African American women have faced even more severe oppressive
conditions. Deborah King in “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness” states that
African American women not only face triple oppression but also other forms of
disempowerments. All these many forms of disenfranchisement results in exponential
disempowerment. King explains, “The modifier ‘multiple’ refers not to several
simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well.
In other words the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism, multiplied
by classicism” (297). Whether it is “double jeopardy”, “triple oppression” or
“multiple jeopardy” it is clearly evident that it has profoundly affected every African
American woman’s life. Harihar Kulkarni aptly writes in this regard:

To sum up the story of black woman in racist, sexist patriarchal
America is the story of vision blinded and perceptual faculties
blurred. It is also a saga of a black feminine self that was alienated,
surrendered and finally forfeited under stress and tension. Arrayed with
the centuries long lies, secrets and degrading myths, brainwashed, and
mentally conditioned and with a self so pathetically fractured, the
black women could never free herself from the ideological snare and
could never acknowledge the innate traits of being both black and
female, could never attempt to interpret her realities form her own
point of view, could never establish her own priorities and define her
true objectives, could not challenge the interstructure of her multiple
oppression, could never really lay any claim to her true heritage and
cultural past, and finally, could not liberate herself in true sense. (84)

The twentieth century has been a ground breaking era for African American
women writers. It is in this era that they finally came out of the shadows of racism and
sexism and created works without any inhibitions. They engendered a tradition of
African American women’s literature. Twentieth century African American women
writers did not start writing suddenly. They were enriching a tradition which existed
much earlier. Earlier writers had built a secure platform for these twentieth century
writers. Thus the roots of the twentieth century African American women writers goes
way back to the times when African American women were not free citizens. Foster
and Davis write:

It was something that should not have happened, but did. Almost from
the day they first set foot upon North American soil, women of African
descent were creating a literature. Before the United States came into
being, African American women were publishing in a variety of genres
and on many topics. (15)

Interestingly the first African American literary artist was not a man, but an
African American slave woman known as Lucy Terry. Her ballad “Bars fight” the
first literary work produced started a long tradition of African American literature.
Phyllis Wheatley, a slave girl, was perhaps the first significant and notable African American literary artist to be recognized and appreciated because of her works. She wrote poetry imitating European literary artists. Unfortunately she died malnourished and still a slave. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs were yet other important slave writers.

Francis Harper, was one of the most important nineteenth century African American women writers who openly debated the ongoing oppression against black women. Harper used literature as her tool, for championing the cause of African American women. Alice Ruth Dunbar Nelson was an important post bellum writer whose literary works often speak of black women’s equal rights.

The contributions of these earlier writers can hardly be denied since they connect antebellum and post bellum African American women’s literature while creating a bridge to contemporary writings in the tradition (Foster 26). They created a sound background for future twentieth century African American women writers who would later start a new chapter in African American literature. The themes and issues of early African American women writers resonates in the literary works of the twentieth century women writers.

The twentieth century heralded a new age, not only for African American women’s literature but for American literature as well. It was a period which saw African American women writers being liberated from their past and writing with a new self-awakening. They finally started writing and defining themselves rather than being defined by others. They broke the boundaries of racism, sexism and class set by white patriarchal society. While discussing the Twentieth Century African American women literature, Barbara Christian writes:
One of course, might say that any literature, at core, is concerned with the definition and discovery of self in relation to the society in which one lives. But for Afro-American women, this natural desire has been powerfully opposed, repressed, distorted by this society’s restriction. For in defining ourselves, Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism, and class that characterize our existence.... Yet the struggle is not won. Our vision is still seen, even by many progressive, as secondary, our words trivialized as minority issues or women’s complaints, our stance sometimes characterized by others as divisive. But there is a deep philosophical reordering that is occurring in this literature that is already having its effect on so many of us whose lives and expressions are an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle. (159-163)

The time-period of twentieth century African American women’s literature can be broadly divided. These broad divisions have their own unique themes and approaches. The literature in the early few decades of the twentieth century was characterized by cultural phenomena called Harlem Renaissance. Explaining the phenomena of Harlem Renaissance, Sharon L. Jones writes:

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, began in the early 1900, and ended around 1940. Coinciding with modernist trends, the Harlem Renaissance was an interdisciplinary cultural movement that reflected literary, musical, dance, artistic, and dramatic developments in African American expression. Additionally, the civil rights movement and the rise of organizations for social
justice also brought much to bear upon the Harlem Renaissance. This movement would have a wide-ranging impact on American literature, changing the growth and direction of what was valued and what was not. (227)

While the nineteenth century literary artist incorporated the themes of revolution, freedom and equal right, the Harlem Renaissance writers started investigating issues such as what is being a black and an American and its implication on literary artists. African American women writers started specifically as women and it was primarily to idealize the black women whose image had been distorted in the general American society (Christian 122).

Major women writers of the Harlem period were Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Marita Bonner, Angelina Weld Grimke, Ann Spencer and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Notably major women writers were novelists. These novelists such as Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston tried to break stereotype images of black women prevailing in mainstream white American society.

Jessie Fauset is one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance and also partly its creator. She is often known as the “mid-wife” of Harlem Renaissance as she played such an important role in its creation. She was an accomplished writer herself, but she also shaped the careers of many other important Harlem writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer and Nella Larsen. Fauset published four novels entitled _There is Confusion_ (1924), _Plum Bun_ (1929), _The Chinaberry Tree_ (1931) and _Comedy American Style_ (1933) in which she explores the issues of identity of African American women. Through her works Fauset fathomed the themes of race and gender which effected African American women’s lives.
Nella Larsen was another important novelist of the Harlem Renaissance. Larsen wrote two influential novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) in which she tried to break negative stereotype images of African American women. Larsen particularly focused on the problems of middle class African American women and their impending problems. Larsen discusses in detail the predicament of mulatto women and their entrapment in the constraints of racism, sexism as well as classicism in American society. Larsen herself was a mulatto. “For Larsen’s character’s beauty is defined but whiteness and the accouterments of bourgeois life. They chafe against the limitations these impose, but lack courage and means to challenge them. As the central metaphors of “quicksand” and “passing” indicate, these characters cannot overcome the constraints of race, gender, and class” (Wall 43). Unfortunately Larsen died in complete obscurity and was forgotten even before her death.

However, the most remarkable and influential artist of the Harlem Renaissance period was Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston through her phenomenal works defined the black folk aesthetic. All her works are imbued in Southern black culture and Hurston’s classic work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) revolutionized African American women’s literature. She depicted the true worth of African American women in relationship with not only her community, but in society as a whole. She beautifully showed how a black woman’s life can enrich her community. Hurston was a multi-talented person, her interests varying from literature to anthropology. While studying anthropology, she became an expert in the field of African American folklores. Hurston applied this knowledge to her literary works creating astounding works never witnessed in African American literature. Hurston bases her works against the back drop of rich Southern black culture. Hurston wrote many short stories and many influential essays. She also wrote four novels, *Jonah’s*
Gourd Vine (1934), Their Eyes were Watching God (1937), Moses, Man of the Mountain (1942), and Seraph on the Suwanee (1948). Unfortunately Hurston died in utter poverty and complete obscurity. Today she is considered the literary foremother of contemporary African American women writers. Katie Geneva Cannon writes about Hurston:

Of all the women in the Black women’s literary tradition who have contributed to the concrete depiction of Black life, Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960) is “par exemplar.” As an outstanding novelist, journalist, folklorist, anthropologist, and critic, Hurston possessed a sharp accuracy in reporting the positive sense of self that exists among poor, marginal Blacks, “the Negro farthest down.” The primary impetus for all her writings was to capture the density of simple values inherent in the provincialism of Blacks who worked on railroads, lived in sawmill camps, toiled in phosphate mines, earning their keep as common laborers….Hurston’s extreme closeness to the sensibilities of her unlettered characters along with her meticulous collection of folklore, legends, superstitions, music, and dance of the common people, enabled her work to serve as a rich repository of resources helpful in delineating the moral counsel cultivated throughout the various periods of Black history in the United States. (37)

After the end of Harlem Renaissance era, the decade of 1940s and 1950s, was dominated by African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. It was also called the age of protest novels where portrayal of battered black man became a recurrent theme. During these times, there were few African American women writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Paule Marshall and Ann Petry and
Margaret Walker who created some significant works. Literature in this period becomes more sharp and hard hitting than ever before. The subtle and indirect veiled protest changed into more clear manifestation of resentment and dejection. Barbara Christian writes in *Black Women Novelists*:

One cannot help but note the similarities between Larsen and Hurston’s disappearances from the world. Although very different writers, they were both assaulted by the prejudices of the other society. Larsen’s writing ability was challenged and Hurston’s sex life was used, consciously or unconsciously, as a means of diminishing her effectiveness as a writer and as an anthropologist. Both charges are indicative of the vulnerable position of black women writers. Their sexual morality and intellectual capacity are seen as tentative, not only by their fellow countrymen but by members of their own race as well. Both writers fell prey to the racial and sexual stereotypes inflicted upon the black woman. If these stellar personalities could be so wounded, one can imagine the many unknown and less protected who suffered a similar fate. No wonder the New Negro Philosophy with its optimistic and genteel spirit gave way to the angry cries of the 1940s.

(61)

Ann Petry creates complex black characters who are subjugated by the hostile external conditions and ultimately annihilate their own oppressors. She wrote *The Country Place* (1945) and *The Street* (1945). *The Street* is a story about a black woman’s existence in ghetto like conditions in Harlem. She is lost in herself. Petry questions the slave like conditions for an urban woman who is still not free. Petry’s works marked a new beginning in the twentieth century literature which depicted the
shallowness of urban life and growing despondency in African American people. Emphasizing the importance of Petry’s works Barbara Christian writes:

Petry’s novel belonged to the new black literary approach of the day, pioneered and symbolized by Richard Wright. In many ways The Street is akin to Native Son (1941) and its relentless presentation of the dreary despair of the inner cities and the illumination of the casual relationship between social and personal crime. As Bigger Thomas typified an alienated black male created partially by the concrete plantations of the North, so Lutie Johnson in The Street is the lost black female, alone and struggling. Both characters become literary types used so often by writers in later years that they have become stereotypes… The Street marks a change in setting and tone in the literary of the black woman. It brings the literature into the twentieth century, for the concrete plantation became the dwelling place of more and more blacks in this century. After the publication of this novel, the black city woman could not be forgotten. The particular brand of slavery under which she exists meant that new changes in the literature would have to occur. (11-12)

Paule Marshall is one of the most important writers of this period. She wrote her influential novel Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959). Her works are like her own manifesto. She portrays characters having different facets yet they are always rooted in their culture and society. In her works, readers see characters yearning for freedom from gender oppression as well as racial oppression. The characters she creates are phenomenal and have complex psyche. She fathoms a wide array of themes like motherhood, sisterhood, marriage, mother daughter relationship and deeply inspects
how they affect women. In Marshall’s works, one can also find the theme of bonding of black sisterhood which was used by writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in their works. Enumerating the importance of Marshall’s works, Harihar Kulkarni writes:

Marshall is a woman writer and therefore thinks that inherent in the process of recovery of self is also creation of feminine aesthetic which involves twofold responsibility: to break the patriarchal imperialism of representation and to celebrate womanhood. She, therefore, challenges woman’s text and hegemonize or totalize “female culture”….While she affirms liberation from racial and gender oppression, she treats both of them as equally liberating points from which to create a literature that is political in form as well as in subject matter. (220)

Margaret Walker is another important writer of this period. She is an influential poet, as well as novelist. The most acclaimed poem of Margaret Walker is “For My People”. At a time when the majority of writers were writing about urban life, Margaret Walker chose to write about African American folk life. Later she wrote a massive historical novel Jubilee (1966). Through her works, Margaret Walker gives a message to her readers to change their life for good.

Gwendolyn Brooks is an important poet and writer and a contemporary of Margaret Walker. She wrote her only novel Maud Martha in 1953. Her themes are common place and are dealt in detail. She does not deal with racism in a direct manner but shows its ramifications for African Americans. Her works have a feel of urbaneness yet are well placed in their cultural paradigms. Commenting on her works, Barbara Christian writes:
One feels both the lyricism, a soul-singing that is found in Zora Neale Hurston’s work, and the harsh cutting edges of Petry’s *The Street*. The major characters in her work, whether verse or fiction, are in the process, flowing in and out of themselves and the world around them. We feel this process because Gwendolyn Brooks is so much in the present, sensing, perceiving, and translating those perceptions into precise words. The words become the perceptions. (13)

The decades of 1960s and 1970s are another important phase in twentieth century African American women’s writing. It was characterized by the rhetoric that “Black is beautiful,” but most importantly black women writers started to write with a new fervour exploring issues like family violence, poverty, abuse, racism, sexism and coercion. To quote Eleanor W. Traylor:

> The founding mothers, with other vanguard women writers, strengthen the revolutionary ferment of the movement to resonate its themes: a renegotiation of power relations between black and white America, a disturbance of ideological imperatives of identity, and a re-direction of the sources for literary production. They also interject another theme: a renegotiation of the power, itself a revolutionary advent. (50)

This phase witnessed the emergence of writers such as Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Margaret Walker, Sherley Ann Williams, Mari Evans and a host of other talented writers. All these literary artists had their own unique focus, and literary style producing works so rich and diverse in the treatment of themes and also style. The twentieth century African American women’s literature saw the advent of a new phase. Barbara Christian writes emphasizing the trends of women writers of this period:
Certain trends do characterize the writings of black women writers during this period. The image of the tragic mulatta no longer dominates the literature and is replaced by a diversity of physical and psychological types. The role of mammy is carefully and continually moved from the level of stereotypes to that of a living human with her own desires and needs. The relationship between black and women is also scrutinized, often in less generic and more particular terms, with special emphasis placed on the societal forces that strain marriage. And most importantly, black women themselves are projected as thinkers, feelers, human beings, not only used by others, but as conscious beings. There are as many black women, these voices say. They have culture, race, sex, sometimes situations in common, but they are not just push button automatons who scream when given this cue, cuddle up when given that smile. They are not just stereotypes, for stereotypes is the very opposite of humanness; stereotype, whether positive or negative, is a byproduct of racism, is one of the vehicles through which racism tries to reduce the human being to a nonhuman level. (16)

The decade of 1970s was chiefly dominated by Black Arts Movement (BAM). Black Arts Movement was an artistic branch of the Black Power Movement started by African American writer and activist Amiri Baraka. African American women writers were deeply influenced by this movement and doubled both as writer and activist. Their works were social investigation as well as literary experimentation. To quote Eleanor W. Traylor:
Women writers of the BAM entered every literary genre and constructed a language that took poetry to the taverns, streets, bars, housing projects, libraries, prisons, parks, newly founded theatres, and time honored churches, language that redirected the conventional expectations of the stage, that interrupted the familiar story told in autobiography, that introduced new discourses, reconstructed the generic expectations of fictions, and that set the premises of theoretically invested essays. (51-52)

With these phenomenal works a new tradition was engendered in African American literature, that of unprecedented subjectivity. “This turning had already initiated the discourse that would soon emerge as visible black feminist/woman centered reclamation” (Traylor 46). Writers such as Tony Morrison, Alice Walker encompassed the struggles of African American women and their search for respect and self-affirmation, while poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez experimented with forms and techniques of poetry. Nikki Giovanni wrote in hard hitting urbane style while Sonia Sanchez explored haiku and tanka forms. “With so much intense literary activity, this decade is, often rightly termed as Black Women’s Renaissance” (Patterson 92).

The decade of 1970s saw the advent of magnificent writers. Alice Walker is one of them. Alice Walker is a prolific writer and multi-faceted literary artist with her works ranging from poems, essays, prose and short stories to novels. Alice Walker is a phenomenal writer who writes with the affirmation that woman is the creator of everything, and direct or indirect, everything relates to woman. Women are the most essential part of any community, without whom destruction is inevitable. She beautifully portraits the struggle of African American women and how they are able


Toni Morrison’s work is earthly fantastic realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. There is something primal about her characters, they come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but basic as the earth they stand on. (24-25)

Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni are two major African American women writers of this period exploring the realm of poetry to express their subjectivity. Sanchez is a great experimenter. She has delved deeply into the Japanese form of
Haiku and Tanka and created her own “Sonku” which depicts African American conditions and “African style, in spoken-word performance poetry; and in inscapes of the heart” (Traylor 58). Her major works are *Home Coming* (1969), *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *It’s a New Day: Poems for Young Brothers and Sistuhs* (1971), *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987). Nikki Giovanni is an urban poet. She has a hard hitting style and a punch line which brings home the theme of the poem to the readers. Her poems also are her means of protest against the ongoing onslaught against African Americans and have a rapping style to it. She is often called “a superstar poet as any black woman poet has been in this century” (Christian 19).

While 1960s literature resonated with themes of self-discovery and celebrating black ness, the 1970s literature was permeated with the notion of black woman asserting her strength and culture. The decade of 1980s once again marked another phase in African American women’s writing. The theme of self-healing became a central trope in African American women’s literature during this period. After rebelling against patriarchy and racism, the main emphasis of these writers was to discover self-love. These writers try to investigate their newly acquired independence and their place in society.

Another important aspect of the decade of 1980s was the issue of lesbianism. Audre Lorde spearheaded this movement in African American women’s literature. Lorde brought a new openness and a revolution in African American literature by portrayal of lesbian relations. Dana A. Williams writes in this context:

> From Walker’s *Color Purple* to Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* to Shange’s *Sassafrass* to Lorde’s *Zami*, lesbian relationships depicted, first, more openly and then differently, reflecting the complexity of these relationships and the varying ways to which communities
respond to them. And while sometimes homophobic African American community is far from a perfect place for African American women to explore their sexuality aggressively, the candor of lesbian writers and the insistent of black feminist literary criticism and queer theory that writers deal uncompromisingly with female sexuality generally and with lesbianism specifically have begun to create a space where lesbianism can fit more comfortably, in the African American literary tradition. (80)

Throughout the decade of 1980s, African American women writers have inquired into love relationships, including lesbian relationships. This decade was marked by “focus on love relationship, coupled with a focus on African American upward mobility” (Williams 80). Audre Lorde is one of the major writers of 1980s decade who brought yet another change in African American women’s writing. Her ‘no inhibition’ attitude about her sexuality opened a new space for the lesbian literature in African American literature bringing a host of other writers following her trail such as Chery Clarke, Sharon Bridgeforth, Jewelle Gomez, Cherry Muhanji, Pat Parker, Sapphire, and April Sinclair. Audre boldly called herself as a “black lesbian feminist warrior poet” (Williams 79). Before dying of cancer in 1992, Lorde had published ten books of poetry and four of prose. Her most acclaimed work is *Zami: a New Spelling of My Name* (1982).

Toni Cade Bambara is one of the best African American short story writers. Her works are an interfusion of radical politics, feminism and African American culture. Her very first book, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) established her as an outstanding writer. Her most important work came in 1980, *The Salt Eaters.* Later
her book *Those Bones Are Not My Child* was published posthumously in 1999 and edited by Toni Morrison.

Sherley Ann Williams is a multi-talented writer. She is a critic, writer, poet, author of literary as well as popular fiction. She not only writes for the adult but also for children. Williams’ works are a representation of her own struggles and aspirations as an artist. In all her works she gives an emphatic message to her readers to unite for their own survival. Her major works, are *The Peacock Poems* (1975), *Someone Sweet Angel Chile* (1982) and *Dessa Rose* (1986). Her novel *Dessa Rose* is a brilliant neo slave narrative about a black slave woman and her incredible journey to find her love.

Ntozake Shange is another influential author and playwright. Shange has traversed multiple genres and experimented with varied forms. Her works are deeply intense and reflect the author’s own psychological dilemma. Shange’s own life was marred by alienation, despair, and dejection which resulted in a number of suicide attempts, but finally she triumphs all these adversities and resurfaced. Shange pours out all her emotions in her works giving them a new edge and instantly connecting with her readers. Her major works are, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976), *Sassafrass, Cypress, Indigo* (1982), *Liliane* (1984).

Gloria Naylor is another important writer of this decade. She created stories depicting African American women’s struggles and resilience. She beautifully delineates heroism in a common man and woman’s life. The talent of Naylor lies in the fact that she gives her readers vivid and realistic experience of what she has been thinking in her mind. Her very first novel *The Women of Brewster Place: a Novel in Seven Stories* (1982) proved her extraordinary talent which won her critical acclaim.

The last decade of the twentieth century, 1990s proved to be the coming of age for African American women’s literature. Now the themes and stories were more diverse and characters more integrated than ever. These works crystallized African American Women’s writer’s experiences. By 1990s, African American women writers had created, recreated and revised conventional tropes and structures. They had explored every possible genre, expanded their rubric and revolted against all type of ‘isms’. The last decades of the twentieth century also saw the rise of popular fiction. Popular fiction is also an essential element of African American literature for they also are part of a literary trend. They also are to achieve a status of canonical form in the near future. Robert Scholes emphasizing this aspect of popular fiction writes:

> The arrival of new media often generates a gap between accepted or “high” texts and those new texts regarded with suspicion or simply labeled “low”. The popular drama in Shakespeare’s time was regarded as low and gradually achieved high status. Following a similar trajectory, the novel began as a low form and was gradually elevated to the level of literary art….But the rise of so many new media, recently, has threatened to leave us with a deep gap between what is thought of as “high” art or literature on the one hand, and “mass” or “popular” culture on the other.” (xv)

There are varied genres of popular culture. Urban romance, Girlfriend Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Black Erotica Fiction, Detective Fiction to name a few. Octavia Butler, Sister Souljah, Sheneska Jackson, Belinde Little, Zane, Barbara Neely, Terry
McMillan are some of the few respected names in popular fiction. African American
Popular writing has different types of narratives and involves different type of reading
strategies. Popular Fiction is often ignored on the grounds that it is written for a
particular class segment and does not aim to cut through demographic boundaries.
“To demand that these writers tailor their work to fit the critical tastes is to treat them
in an ahistorical fashion” (Beavers 265). At one time Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their
Eyes Were Watching God* was also dismissed by her male critics for being frivolous
which today is considered as the greatest literary work of the Twentieth Century.

Emphasizing the importance of popular fiction, Herman Beavers comments:

> In other words, whether black women are reading popular authors like
> McMillan or more canonical figures like Alice Walker or Toni
> Morrison, they are involved in a set of practices whose overall result is
to counteract the effect of negative images. This is not to say that they
read popular fictions uncritically, with no sense of what makes a
fiction successful or unsuccessful, but rather it is to insist: (a) that
black popular writing indicates the manner in which reality is contested
by the interpretative communities of women at the local level, and (b)
the act of reading for pleasure, within the context of wish-fulfillment,
can be understood as a transgressive act that makes it possible to
imagine - and reimagine- utopian circumstance. (267)

Sheneska Jackson’s *Li’l Mama Rules* and Belinda Little’s *Good Hair* are
famous examples of popular fiction which depict middle class African American
women. Similarly Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* is another very famous book
in which the protagonist Robin is often mocked and taken advantage of her
vulnerability by several lovers who laugh at her singlehanded devotion to her elderly
parents. Later a film was also made on this book. Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a story about “gangsta life style” and yet is also a cautionary story. The protagonist is Winter who lives a filthy rich life owing to her father’s illegal drug business. Her life revolves around drug, violence and unsafe sex but in the end Souljah shows the reality of fast life and illegal money. Winter’s father is sentenced to jail for two consecutive life times, her mother becomes a drug addict, Winter’s sister’s ends up in a foster house and Winter herself has to live the life of a destitute. 

Zane is another successful writer of popular culture who writes in the subgenre of Black Erotica. She creates novels spinning female fantasies and desires. In her famous novel *Heat Seekers*, Tempest the protagonist affirms both her sexuality and freedom, both. She talks about her past lovers as “Sorry mofos.” She talks about one of her lovers as a “brotha was born with a platinum tongue…Whatever it was the brotha had mad skillz. Not skills, skillz. He used to make me scream out his name in forty-two different languages” (Zane 3). Some may find Zane’s work as a mere representation of sex hungry African American women but this analogy is incorrect. On the contrary, “it is much more accurate to draw links to Janie Woods, the hero of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who holds the distinction of being the first protagonist in African American literature to develop her own ideas about female sexual pleasure and pursue them” (Beavers 270).

Then there are Detective fictions of Barbara Neely, who explores the subgenre of mystery. *Blanche on the Lam* is her famous mystery novel. Her protagonist Blanche White works as a maid in day time and detective in night time. Blanche is told “They jealous cause you got the night in you. Some people got night in ’em, some got morning, others, like me and your mama, got dusk. But only them that’s got the night can become invisible” (Neely 59). The readers are reminded of Ellison’s
Invisible Man, but here Neely makes it clear that Blanche’s invisibility does not arise because of her dark skin but her affinity with night which brings out her alter-ego. Neely’s decision to make her protagonist a maid servant also seems to be an effort on her part to break the stereotype of Mammy.

Speculative Fiction or the novel of suspense is another subgenre of popular fiction. Writers such as Octavia Butler have written important novels in this field. She has written Parable of the Sower, a novel where America in 2025 is marred by rampant violence, crimes and wide gulf between rich and poor. The protagonist is Olamania Lauren who writes journals filled with parables. The protagonist develops her own theory of Earthseed, as the greatest force which is changing the face of earth. In the end Butler gives an emphatic message to her readers to beware of their future lest they mend their ways.

Writers such as Tananarive Due explore the realm of the supernatural theme based novels. Due’s first novel is The Between, where protagonist Hilton James lives a life in between the world of the dead and the living, with each having their own hazards. In her novel Due makes use of African American folklores and African myths creating a surrealistic as well as realistic piece of work. There are also other writers like A. J. Verdelle, Tina McElroy, J. California Cooper, Pearl Cleage, and Ansa who fall in between the tradition of ‘literary’ and ‘popular.’ These writers are as important as literary writers since these works are classic in making in the near future. These novels often tell readers about characters who live in urban environment with all basic comforts but these conditions also give rise to several struggles that these characters face. The works of these writers are like mirrors which reflect the situations and conditions of the contemporary society. To quote Herman Beaver:
We do, I think, have to acknowledge that the readers of popular fiction written by African American women writers are adept at holding the world, the text, and their sense of self in a critical tension that allows them to engage what they read in ways that may serve a didactic function in their lives as it also complicates what it means for them to experience pleasure….if we consider writers like Hammet and Chandler whose works are now considered “literary,” what becomes clear is that critics are not prognosticators; we cannot, with any certainty, estimate what sorts of conditions will arise to make a text that we now deem to be popular into a classic. What we do know is that reading for pleasure can be understood as an act of rehearsal in the ongoing drama of self-invention. (276)

Coming of Age of African American women’s literature in the twentieth century has not been an easy process. The journey has been an arduous and tortuous one. Emerging out of enslavement, cutting across vectors of racism, sexism and classicism, and also facing discrimination and prejudice by their own male counterparts, the route has never been easy for African American women writers. These writers have created literature not for success, fortune or financial rewards but to tell their own story and personal experiences. To quote Claudia Tate:

Whether the subject of a book originates in personal experience, in observation, empathy, or imaginative projection it is not nearly so important as the degree of truthfulness and sincerity with which a book is rendered. If a writer honestly depicts what he or she really feels, sees and believes, rather than merely to portray what might please a specific audience or what might be financially rewarding, then a work breathes
with its own self-sustaining vitality. It then possesses a truth that exceeds the limited experience that is depicted and is, therefore, applicable to life in general. The work, despite of or perhaps precisely because of its unique and particular details of race and gender, achieves universality. (xviii)

African American women writers are acting like a mouthpiece for the existing black women in America. They have tried to declare the true reality and also created the truth in their own way, which defies existing perceptions. Instead of writing for a larger audience, they have written for themselves and all other African American women. “They write for themselves as a means of maintaining emotional and intellectual clarity, of sustaining self-development and instruction. Each writes because she is driven to do so, regardless of whether there is a publisher, an audience or neither” (Tate xviii).

One of the major endeavors of twentieth century African American women writers has been to break negative stereotypes about black women. There are several false myths and wrong stereotypes about African American women existing in American society which degenerates them into a perverted image. Explaining the stereotypes existing in the main stream American society, Mary Helen Washington writes:

Stereotypes about black women abound like weeds in this society. It is common practice to make slick, easy generalizations about them. Statements such as, black women have always been strong, they have always been liberated, they’re treated better than black men, they’re evil, they’re loud are made so frequently that they are accepted as known fact. The white media have been in on the act for a long time,
of course, creating such perverted fantasies as Beulah, Sapphire, Pinky, and Aunt Jemima, which are adequate evidence of the abuse of the black woman’s image. And the habit still persists. People other than the black woman herself try to define who she is, what she is supposed to look like, act like and sound like. And most of these creations bear very little resemblance to real live black women. (ix)

African American women writers and their literature have constantly tried to debunk these existing myths about black women. Whether it is the greasy, dirty image of a “Mammy”, or sex-hungry, lewd image of “Jezebel” or a tragic mulatto or the caricature of the dominating black woman as “Sapphire”, all have negatively rendered a falsified image of black women. African American women writers by offering the real truthful definition of black womanhood, have installed a new pride, self-love and identification among African American women writers. Zora Neale Hurston while creating the character of Janie in her classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, started a new literary tradition which truly reflected that black women were—bold, confident and self-sustaining. Similarly, Nella Larsen’s protagonist Helga Crane, in *Quicksand* is sophisticated and refined with an aesthetic sense. The protagonists of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are an embodiment of the true spirit of American women. African American women writers have a unique heritage, that of being black but female having African roots, but also Western culture making their works visionary, yet with a universal appeal. Their works are contemporary yet they have often used African folkways in their work. They write about the present difficulties a black woman is going through, yet they have not forgotten the torrid past of slavery. Claudia Tate comments on this unique cultural heritage of African American writers:
By virtue of their race and gender, black women writers find themselves at two points of intersection one where Western culture cuts across vestiges of African heritage, and one where male female attitudes are either harmoniously parallel, subtly divergent, or in violent collision. Their work addresses what it means to be human, a condition not entirely determined by genetic makeup but is also a comprised of conscious volition. (xvi)

These writers have explored various themes and delved deep into many issues pertaining to African American women. There are certain generic themes and tropes which reoccur in their works giving an insight into a black woman’s life. Commenting on the themes and works of African American women writers, Mary Helen Washington writes, “What is most important about the black woman writer is her special and unique vision of the black woman. Since Iola Leroy, the first novel written by a black woman writer, has been the black woman herself –her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship to her men and her children, her creativity” (x).

One of the most important themes in the twentieth century African American women’s literature is that of growing up black and female. Major women writers have delved deep into this issue. For example, Toni Morrison in The Bluest Eyes, Maya Angelou in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Louise Meri Whether in Daddy Was a Number Runner, Paule Marshall in Brown Girl, Brownstones and many other works all deal with the experiences of a black girl growing up in a hostile environment. These writers show how African American girls develop a self-resilient spirit in order to cope with adverse external environment.

Color theme is another important theme which can be found in the works of the twentieth century African American women writers. Wishful thinking about white
beauty can be found in many major works of these writers. Mary Helen Washington comments:

If the stories of these writers are to be believed then the color/hair problem has cut deep into the psyche of the black woman. It is that particular aspect of oppression that has affected, for the most part, only women. I could not find a single piece of fiction written by a black male in which he feels ugly or rejected because of the shade of his skin or the texture of his hair. In contrast, the color almost always plays at least a peripheral role more often a significant one—in the lives of the women characters created by women writers. (xvii)

By delving deep into the psyche of a black woman as well as out of their own personal experience, these writers have created one of the most poignant characters and stories in American literature. For example, Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* wishes for blue eyes as a way to redeem herself. Similarly the character Maryginia Washington in Gwen Brook’s *Maud Martha*, emphasizes that black women seem to be offensive with their black color. Maya Angelou in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, divulges her childhood fantasy of being a blonde and a white. Thus, the parameters of beauty as defined by white American society have scarred the psyche and souls of black women, which is often reflected in their works.

Antagonistic relationship between African American men and women and failed relationship is another frequently occurring theme in the works of these writers. African American women have often been abandoned by African American males and have raised their family all by themselves. Economic and social disability has marred the relationship between black men and women. This has been investigated by
these writers in their works and they have often shown that African Americans have an independent and resilient spirit and can survive all on their own. They are undeterred by abuse and violence by black men. For example, the characters of Sula and Nel in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Celie in Alice Walker’s *Color Purple*, Janie in Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* all triumph against odds and live life on their own terms.

The twentieth century African American women writers have achieved a rare literary feat. They have debunked the falsified myths about a black woman, shattered the racist and sexist iconoclasts and reconstructed and revisioned new canons in not only African American literature but also their own weaknesses. To quote Claudia Tate:

> Being both black and female these writers write from a unique vantage point. They project their vision of the world, society and community, family, their lovers even themselves most often through the eyes of black female characters and poetic persona. Their angle of vision allows them to see what white people, especially males, seldom see. With one penetrating glance they cut through layers of institutionalized racism and sexism and uncover the core of social contradictions and intimate dilemmas which plague all of us regardless of our race gender. Through their art they share their vision. (xvi)

The twentieth century African American women writers are very much integral to African American women literature and have enriched American literary tradition with their own unique perspective. These writers have caused a paradigm shift in African American literature. Fighting against white supremacy and their own black men’s abuse, they have carved their own niche. Their impact can be felt not only
in the field of literature but in every aspect of African American life. They have brought a new change in the way of thinking and feeling in the lives of African American people, especially that of African American women.

Most importantly, twentieth century African American women writers have broken new grounds, created new literary canons and paved the way for twenty first century writers. Today young and dynamic writers, who are creating a new upsurge in the literary world, are in one way or the other indebted to these twentieth century African American women writers. To end, it would be apt to quote Dana E. Williams who writes about these phenomenal African American women writers:

Clearly, even as contemporary African American women authors write to distinguish themselves, they also inevitably enhance the grand tradition of American letters. And they do so by telling their multifaceted stories….What we find in contemporary African American women writers are many “black girls” singing their own songs, and they sing them bravely, boldly, and remarkably. (85)
Works Cited


