CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
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In recent years, African Americans have earned recognition and opportunity in theater and in almost every media of expression. Highly versatile in their perception and expression, African American playwrights of this century have obtained wide appreciation all over the world and every season features with so many African American productions appearing on legitimate stage. Showered with prestigious awards and fellowships, these playwrights have not only proved their merit but also created their own place, not as a part of American theater but as a platform of their own.

Appearing on stage, in recording medias like television and films, African Americans have introduced their creative genius to the world. In the mainstream of American theater, these playwrights hold their position very high by establishing themes and techniques that differ from American drama and project all the way a distinct experience. Projecting their capacities, Black artists like Abraham Hill, Austin Bridge, Fredrik O’Neill have enriched African American theater to a great extent. Throughout their lives the black playwrights consider theater as a media of social change and stand as spokespersons of the black community. Paul Robeson and Jim Harris were highly appreciated for the role they played in Eugene O’Neill’s plays Emperor Jones and All Gods Chillun Got Wings respectively. Along with the subtle artistic sensitivity, these playwrights had strong bonds with their people and a pride for the black color and black race.
African American dance and song is a gift the blacks have given to the stream of American culture. The forms like spirituals, ragtime plays, blues, jazz have become extremely popular and have given a rhythmic tone and accent to the American life. Along with the blacks, these forms also have passed through various stages of black life and witnessed their times and experiences. In their hard times, during the slavery days, artistic expressions helped blacks to release their agony, depression and tensions. After getting freedom from the hell of slavery, these artistic expressions became their source of income and many blacks could survive by performing various shows.

Along with music, African Americans have shown excellence in dance. In New Orleans, South Calinda, - the dance form named Bambula became popular. In 1898, a new dance form called ‘Cake Walk’, was evolved by William and Walker, which became popular in the South. These forms opened the door for black artists on Broadway. Therefore, in contemporary time, in television and films, blacks are performing ‘mission impossible’; they are working with police and appearing as star performers. Robert Chrisman acknowledges this achievement of the African Americans when he says:

“Blacks are playing an increasingly important role in the lore of white supremacy that is being promulgated these days in the television networks”.

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African American theater has a long and distinguished history. The study of Black theater includes works of individual playwrights, actors, directors in various forms like, political theater, agit-prop, musical comedy, etc. Black playwrights of this century have enriched the American theater in general and Black theater in particular by giving a strong sociological base. They have brought on stage altogether a new world of ‘left-overs’, who were very much in the society but were never presented on the stage. The emergence of Black playwrights has brought on the stage a vast range of human experiences with their complexities.

Through these artistic endeavours the Black artists have given to the Americans something more than mere entertainment. It appears that they are motivated by a specific cultural purpose. Their art indicates a conscious attempt on their part to preserve and protect their cultural distinctness which is totally different from European art and aesthetics.

This distinctness, in itself, is a creation of one’s own artistic cultural-norms which enable them to create their own art and aesthetics. Moreover, they deny the Euro-American artistic models. This refusal and denial of the established art structures has led the blacks to the process of search and research of something of their own in the field of arts and aesthetics. This poses certain questions in our mind. Why the blacks seek to preserve their own cultural tone and mood? What have the blacks lost and what is it they are searching for? What could be the reason behind the rejection of established culture and art?
At the core of these questions, there is a two-fold conflict; it is a conflict 'within' and 'without'. The conflict 'within' deals with the soul and psyche of the black man, torn between two cultures, striving for his own identity in America. The conflict 'without' deals with the Black society protesting against the white forces for self-respect, justice and equal share at every level in America. This conflict is at the same time between the oppressor and the oppressed, between two races, two colors, two ideologies and two values.

This is aptly described by Genevieve Fabre who says:

"On one side is the West, kingdom of rationality and technology. On the other is the spirit, called soul or blackness, which breaks away from reason in order to save the world. On one side domination and restrictive law of the oppressor; on the other side liberation, freedom and an enduring reconciliation among blacks".²

Black literature is a living experience; an odyssey of endurance, sufferings and agonies of the black people in the white world. DuBois asserts in *The Souls of the Black Folks*:

"The history of American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood to merge his double self into better and truer self".³

The experience in Black literature and art is live and a real one. It is subjective at the same time collective; it reveals the blueprint of the African American group of people as a separate cultural nation.
Being unique in its expression, Black literature honestly and originally reflects the pronouncement of the Black people. This body of expression consists of black work-songs, gospel songs, ballads, folk rhythms, folk tales, blues and spirituals. It is the most profound and exciting study of the black experience and black soul.

Taking into account the social changes, it projects various stages of the Black man’s assertion as Negro, Colored, New Negro, Black Afro-American and African American. These stages indicate phases of their assertion for self-respect at different phases of time.

Throwing light on the relentless struggle of a deprived racial minority for equality, Black literature brings out the spiritual need of the blacks for heritage that they lost through centuries. The paradoxical experiences the blacks had in America, wherein friendship was delusion and love always disintegrated and the white hegemony that compelled them to live the life at a subhuman level, made them realise that they have no place within the borders of America. The life of black man in America is characterized by humor, pathos, aspiration and tragedy. Though blacks were very much there in America, they were made invisible, having no form and shape of their own. These formless, colorless, shapeless souls in search of selfhood, form their own way of expression in art and literature. They tried to resurrect forgotten ancient Negro art and history and “set the black man before the world as both, a creative artist and a strong subject for artistic treatment”.

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Therefore, Black literature and other arts aim at the physical and psychological liberation of the black people from the dominant white notions of art and culture. Black artists thought it to be their primary duty to speak about the spiritual and cultural needs of their people. This kind of sense of fulfillment of their artistic duty is strongly motivated by the brutality of the slavery period and the humiliating treatment they received after their emancipation.

Though blacks were liberated from the cyclone of slavery in 1863, and got equal status by law, they were enslaved by a “dual consciousness”, a term defined by DuBois. After the Civil War, though blacks are totally free from the disadvantages of slavery, it has left indelible scars on their psyche. Living in tortured consciousness and fractured psyche, the black man out of fear, suffered from crippled mentality which generates in him inferiority complex.

It is a strange condition in which blacks have lost their sight and way. It is the ‘two-ness’, that has been compelling blacks to compare themselves with the whites. The years of depression and degradation have weakened their vision to look at themselves as unique and complete human beings. It happens because their “eyes are clouded by the concept of white supremacy”.

However, the Blacks have always tried to assimilate themselves in the mainstream of American life. But their efforts were
defeated and whites never stopped opposing and rejecting blacks and their aesthetic abilities. Charls Davis, in his book, *Black is the Color of Cosmos* says:

“The artistic activities of these early blacks are entirely lost in obscurity. In addition to this, slavery acted to erase the memory of an old culture and did not allow them to set a foundation of a new”.

The blacks could neither secure their place in American literature and art, nor could they receive a word of appreciation in the American society. Because of lack of appreciation and absence of Black themes in white literary cosmos, the blacks were constrained to create their own black cultural cosmos under which they could project their dream of a separate black nation. Therefore, black literature and Black theatre at once become polyphonic incorporating in it their political, social, economic and cultural life.

Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power which is a political organization working for the liberation of the blacks. It is a nationalistic concept deeply rooted in the African American’s desire for selfhood that intensifies the sense of black man as a strong, autonomous and a creative human being. The black art attempts to record the chaos of black life. Taking into consideration the key aspects of black cultural energy like dance, music, religiosity, black artists make conscious use of the themes, images, symbols, legends, fables, myth and resources of language, which
would exemplify Black Aesthetics. The term ‘black art’ is of ancient origin but it was coined forcefully by LeRoi Jones, a black nationalist poet, essayst, and dramatist. The concept of Black Art is closely related to the concept of Black nation. Through arts, blacks want to develop the concept of black nation for which they have consciously developed black culture. They do it as Frantz Fanon believes:

"the concept of culture and nation are inseparable. If we talk about nation, we talk about culture.... It is a creation of the same sensibility. It issues out of the same value system. The largest sensibility we deal with now is the National sensibility. To free the nation at the same time is to free the culture".8

Blacks celebrate their concept of black nation through art and literature by consciously avoiding and rejecting every symbol imposed by the whites. In 1996, a leading African American playwright August Wilson, in a theater conference at Princeton University declared:

"We need a value system that includes our contribution as Africans in America. Our agendas are as valid as yours. We may disagree, We may forever be on opposite sides of aesthetics, but we can only share a value system that is inclusive of all Americans and recognizes their unique and valuable contributions".9

As a strong reaction to the white cultural and artistic imperialism, African Americans prefer to be called themselves as Blacks
rather than Negroes. For the blacks, the word Negro has no language, no culture, no land, no home and hence no identity. The total rejection of the white culture including everything associated with it, forms the base of all thematic concerns of the black literature.

Black aesthetics, according to the black artists, has a certain system to provoke and evoke the hidden qualities of the black man and to accelerate their energy for the betterment of the society. Black artists not only challenge the validity of the white aesthetics but also pose certain questions in order to check the eternity and truthfulness of the vision of life of both the communities. Therefore, Larry Neal observes aptly: “The motive behind the black aesthetics is the deconstruction of the white things, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world”.\textsuperscript{10}

For the black artists, art is not something to be practiced solely for artists pleasure and entertainment but it has a definite purpose - the purpose to instruct and educate the society. Their aim is to create black consciousness among the black community so that they will not fall prey to the white ideas. It is because of this Maulana Ron Karenga, a black political thinker believes:

“Black art should be an authentic expression of black culture. Black art should be structured by a dialectical relationship between the artist and the people... Art should be communicable to the masses and should inherit symbols, forms, subjects from the community life”.\textsuperscript{11}
Explaining the nature, scope and structure of the black art he
further says:

“Our intention is that if art is from the people
and for the people, there is no question of rising
people to art or lowering art to people, for they
are one and the same thing.... Art and people
must develop at the same time and for the same
reason. It must be with the masses and moved
by the masses”.

Ed Bullins, a black dramatist and highly respected literary
figure, in The Village Voice declares the manifesto of the black art. He
maintains:

“We don’t want a higher form of white art in
black face: we are working toward something
entirely different and new that encompasses the
soul and spirit of black people and that
represents the whole experience of our being
here in this land”.

For LeRoi Jones, black art is a unifying force that strengthens
the black community. He desires that the art should be based on unity of
black people rather than division of black people. It is based on “self
determination”. He says further: “We want an art that would be a weapon
against cultural aggression”. Hence, black art should be committed for
expressing all the symbols, actions, colors, signs, figures, tunes that represent
black life as a unique structure. It is a structure wherein art and culture are
inseparable. Further he asserts:
“art is one particular aspect of culture. Art expresses the values of its creator - the value being whatever you think is good and what you think is bad, what you think is beautiful and what you think is ugly”\textsuperscript{16}

The cultural suppression of the blacks for more than two hundred years has created their consciousness. Black consciousness is a black spiritual frame of reference based on the humanism of the non-white world. The black consciousness movement in the 1960s is an assertion of black self-determination and black identity.

According to Lerone Bennett, Jr., “It is a return to the wisdom of [our] African fathers, who recognized that men also vote by dancing, singing, fighting and making love”\textsuperscript{17}

Therefore, the Black Art and Black Aesthetics not only desire to define black style but also the ways in which black artists can best employ their style in the people’s interest. Black literature as one of the arts, therefore, becomes the literature of the masses; it breaks the limitations of individualism and speaks for collective experience, where ‘I’ transforms into ‘we’ and the whole society forms a chain of togetherness to fight against the white hegemony. This collective self aims at the elevation of black color, code and sound to a magical status. By transforming black from neutral phase to colorful status, blacks want to establish the supremacy, brightness and beautifulness of the black color.
In Black literature and Black theater black color holds a very special and significant place. Awareness of the black color and the negative values attached to it by the white cultural establishment is the most productive and inspiring source for black writers in America. From the white point of view, black color was regarded as the social and cultural stigma. Consciousness about this in the black artist has brought new strength and identity in Black writings. It is probably for the first time in the history of art and specially in literature that any color has become the dominating factor projecting the multidimensional polyphonic references.

For the black people, blackness has symbolic implications. It stands for Africa and African people's consciousness, their ritual, skin, psyche, pride and beauty. Moreover, it also stands for the customs, traditions, religion, culture, language and history. "Blackness", for Black thinkers like Lerone Bennett Jr.:

"is a truth which stands at the centre of the human experience, and that all who reflect the rays of that dazzling darkness reflect a truth which is close to the truth of man".18

"Blackness" to him:

"is that universe of values and attitudes and orientations which rises, like dew from the depth of our ancestral experience and pulls us toward the distant shores of our destiny".19
Bennett considers blackness the truth and a set of values that are permanent and eternal. Blackness is the truth and truth again is a state of enlightenment and knowledge. In short, for Bennett blackness is a light of knowledge that leads to freedom.

To raise the black color to the prestigious status, blacks have had to fight on political, social and cultural level. For them blackness is a challenge to prove their strength, and capacities and an opportunity to expose the false notion of white universality.

The white aestheticians never considered any possibility of beauty in black color. Moreover, they did not allow blackness to project it's aesthetic and qualitative aspect. In the white shadow, black color could never secure its place and prestige. The artistic quality of this color never got recognition and appreciation and had to suffer unbearable degradation and humiliation. In dictionaries too, black has been treated as a synonym for evil and witchcraft. In literature, especially in the history and tradition of drama, white was always appreciated and black was displaced. Addison Gayle observes:

"The distinction between whiteness as beautiful (good) and blackness as ugly (evil) appears very early in the literature of the Middle ages -in Morality Plays of England. Heavily influenced by Platonism and Christianity, these plays set forth the distinction which exist today. To be white was pure, good, universal and beautiful; to be black was to be impure, evil, parochial and ugly." 20
In changing times, the definition of blackness also changed. Blackness has been studied from different perspectives and attitudes by black writers. In slavery period, blackness was a symbol of exploitation and humiliation. Charls Davis thought blackness as "the shirt of pain". Langston Hughes, the playwright, poet and thinker considers blackness to be a mark of pain and hardship. In Harlem Renaissance, blackness was considered to be a disturbing, complicated, ambiguous creation of contemporary civilization. In 1930s, blackness often meant dislocation, sickness, unemployment and general misery. However, they attempted to glorify their blackness by saying 'Black is beautiful', 'Blacker the berry, sweeter the juice'. Richard Wright, a thinker and black novelist, considered blackness both as the caste and as pattern of exclusion, segregation and deprivation in the urban North. He studied blackness in metaphysical terms, a condition of alienation so profound that old values no longer applied.

Ralph Elison relates blackness with the problem of visibility and identity. The point he makes is that one's existence depends upon the cognizance taken of him by the others. According to him, black color was purposefully refused and made invisible by whites. The absence of recognition made blackness invisible.

In the 60s, LeRoi Jones, a nationalist, poet and dramatist redefined blackness in a new system of aesthetics entirely opposed to western aesthetics and values. He gave a new dimension to this color and placed it
to the status of an explosive. The popularity of black color culminated in the 60s with its emphasis on the African roots and tradition.

The roots of the black theater and literature are grounded in the process of making and remaking of the black society. The structure of any art and literature depends on the social contexts and life-situations and its texture is woven out of the social surroundings in which that particular art develops. However, due to their predicament, for the blacks, Africa is a memory and a dream and America, on the other hand, a fact and reality. It is a fact that the opposition between a dream and reality flings black man into the void.

The roots of the black theater go back to the slavery days. The real drama in black theater is destined with the exploration of America, The New World, which proved to be the beginning of both, the dark episodes to come in the life of blacks and their complex relationship with this land.

In pursuit of commercial revolution the Europeans brought this “black gold”\(^2\) to Europe. They established strong contacts with the African slave traders who, in exchange of wine, gun powder, ivory, leather items, would supply them black slaves in a great number. Very soon, these slave traders created a source of great wealth in the “traffic of human souls”.\(^3\)

In 1793, cotton gin gave a new life to the textile industry and the fertile huge land available in the United States encouraged European businessmen for plantation. Very soon cotton became the most satisfactory
textile material. Within few years, the US became tremendous profit-land. As the cotton demand increased, the ships full of black slaves started porting on the coasts of America. No wonder, that the slave trade became an accepted and profitable part of European commerce. Negroes came to America both as explorers and mainly as slaves. In 1619, twenty Negroes were sold at Jamestown by a Dutch captain. It was the beginning of involuntary importation of human beings in America which continued for the next two hundred years. Negro slavery then became a fixed institution.

The colonist didn't pay any attention to the status of the newly arrived blacks, nor to their place in the evolving society. The white masters used them as commodities in which nothing remained of their own. Discarded at every level, blacks were treated as chattels. Thus, they were reduced to a thing that has no existence of its own and can be purchased and sold by anybody. As a thing can not have any feeling, can be controlled and disposed off after its use, similarly blacks were considered only in terms of production value, just like a machine, a lifeless body that functions mechanically. They were systematically and programmatically enslaved and were robotised by white masters for the sake of their own profit.

As a result, they were deprived of their customs, traditions, religion, language, culture, belief and rituals. It is very difficult for any group of humanity to forget its culture and heritage to which it belongs to.

Coming to America in chains, the black man was systematically and legally robbed of his humanity. From the very first day
of their arrival, they were forced to leave everything they inherited from Africa. Consequently, they suffered from socio-economic, political and cultural subordination. They were forced to forget their own familial, social and cultural values.

Thus, Africans were brought to the new world as slaves and their physical powers were exploited for the profit of others. Slavery was not something new for the Africans. Africans had long been enslaved by other Africans in West Africa, but slavery in America differed from African slavery.

The Whites intentionally kept blacks away from the process of socialization. The Whites were fully aware of the strength and capacities of the black man. They didn’t want the blacks to realize their own qualities since self-realization leads to sense of selfhood that speaks the language of revolt. Hence, as administrators, whites were in search of a programme which would enable them to rule safely so that they could keep their hold intact on black slaves for a longer time. Physically they could never defeat the blacks. Hence, shrewdly the whites decided to control them psychologically by creating in them an inferiority complex about their own color and race which would deprive them from the feeling of self-esteem and selfhood and always keep them in a sense of a perpetual guilt. After being exploited at every level by their masters, blacks were totally uprooted from their social and cultural beliefs. They lost their own way of living and
their vision to look at life. As a result they were totally alienated from their own set of values and finally suffered from their irremediable loss of identity.

As blacks were forced to work on the plantations from sunrise to sunset, they hardly had time to think of the conscious creation of a work of art. However, in the hell of slavery blacks somehow managed to survive with the help of the art forms they brought with them from their soil. Blacks, when they had spare time, used to gather in the dense woods and express their unbearable sorrow and agony. Their cry and screams took the form of a collective art expression which helped them to subside their misery and agony.

Blacks relished their painful moments in a more intense way. In this process the blues form was born. Blues provided an artistic outlet to their torment. It was a cultural method of coping in a hostile and dehumanizing environment. Lonard Goines observes:

“He (The black man) was physically abused, his working hours were long, and even his right to sing dance and pray was challenged. Nevertheless, black people made music, though as a result of the restrictions imposed by the slave owners and the institution of slavery itself, then music was largely communal and was used to lighten physical and emotional burdens”.

The first reaction against the oppression of the blacks could be observed in poetry and novel. However, printed matter had a limited role and failed in the large coverage of the black society, especially poor and
illiterate sections. Black artists were constrained to think of such a form which would, along with the literate sections, make the lower sections of the black community understand easily and effectively about their own conditions and explain to them about the nature of black revolt. No wonder, this necessity led the black artists to choose theatre as their weapon to educate and reform the society.

Theater, an audio-visual media is an effective tool in educating masses. As a media of communication, theatre proved to be highly successful and since then black artists have been using it as a means to educate the society and experimenting with new themes and techniques to project the brightness of the black color. Another reason for the black artists to adopt theatre-form on such a large scale could be that it not only possesses universal and concrete audio-visual language, but also develops a make-believe technique which would enable both, the artists and the audience, to relieve and re-experience their historical past which has become inseparable part of their life and art.

Search for the origin of the black theatre begins with the arrival of the black man to the shores of America. Although blacks were brought here naked and in chains, they carried with them the rich cultural heritage of their homeland. When they were taken to plantation and got exhausted after hardwork and the beating from the white masters, they used to gather together so that they could sing, dance and entertain themselves and their white masters.
In this show, the slave was cast in a double role, that of a labourer and an entertainer. The performance of this kind came to be called as minstrel show. These shows were “born out of plantation playtimes around the negro cabins”.

It was a masking ritual, improvised in nature, which was the first authentic dramatic form of their own. It has been acknowledged by Eleanor W. Taylor in the following words: “When the lore, songs, dance and masking ritual of African slaves made their entrance on the stage, a native American dramatic form was born. Something new and entirely different: the minstrel show”.

The plantation performers were presenting what might be called a caricature of themselves primarily to please their masters. An anonymous water-color painting in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art collection called “The old plantation” gives some idea of the structure of these shows. In this painting, Negroes are shown dancing, singing playing a drum and a banjo before their rough cabins. At a distance is the master’s elegant house.

In these shows, Negro used to play the role of a buffoon who danced, jocked and his lines were written for him by a white author. Edith JR Isaacs considers the minstrel show as the first authentic African American theatre form.

The minstrel shows transmitted the oral tradition, making apt use of language, reference, allusion and beliefs. It was “an ecstatic performance guided by a fluid text”. Since minstrel shows were improvised
in its structure, the conscious efforts to develop character, plot or theme were not observed. These “minstrels made extensive use of humour, fantasy, and animal fables that they almost derived from African American folk song and narrative, which relied heavily on animal symbolism, used indirections and guide to voice protests or attack adversaries, and featured victories of the weak over the strong” 28 Another form called blues was created in the process of confrontation and improvisation.

The emergence of narrative-form brought entirely new mode of expression to the art of story telling. Narrative-form served as a new form of relaxing experiences for the slaves. Like the art of story telling, narrative also is an improvisation in which language, mime voice and gesture carry immense importance. Genevieve Fabre remarks about its nature: “The action is not only seen and acted out but also told and often presented as a fable from which a moral or message should be drawn…” 29

By 1845, the slave narrative had become a powerful literacy device. The narrative was first employed with skill and in more dramatic manner by William Wells Brown in Escape or a Leap for Freedom which became the first African American dramatic text.

Before 1920, there was no substantial body of plays by black playwrights. But by 1925-26 the situation became somewhat brighter. DuBois observes that in 1925 there were a dozen or more plays of Negro life worth staging. This decade opened the door of opportunities for the
black themes in theatre. Eugene O’Neill was the pioneer who explored new possibilities into black themes.

About the non-white dramatists, Alain Locke very significantly observes, when he says:

“pioneering genius in the development of the native American drama, such as Eugene O’Neill, Ridgely Torrence, and Paul Green, now sees and recognizes the dramatically undeveloped potentialities of Negro life and folkways as a promising province of native idioms and source materials in which a developing national drama can find distinctive new themes, characteristic and typical situations, authentic atmosphere”. 30

Though the pioneering efforts were made by white playwrights, the black thinkers like W.E.B.DuBois and Alain Locke had realized the need for conscious efforts in black themes by the black playwrights. DuBois advised black theatre groups to develop black drama in close collaboration between black actors, black playwright and black audience. He stated:

“The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: (1) About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. (2) By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. (3) For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. (4) Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighbourhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.” 31
DuBois drew an outline of black theatre saying that the play must be a realistic depiction of black life.

Civil rights organization NAACP, (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) considered black theatre as a platform for destroying negative black images propagated through various modes of expression by whites. Some important plays of this period are A Sunday Morning in the South (1925) by Georgia Dougls, Johnson Balo (1924) by Jean Toomer. Harlem by Wallace Thourman (1929) and Appearances by Gerland Anderson (1925).

In 1930, black theatre saw the beginning of commercial success. It portrayed the life of black people with depth and insight. The Federal Theatre Project was launched in 1930, which brought new possibilities of experiments in black themes. Under this project, Frank Wilson’s plays, Meck Mose, Walk Together Chillun (1934) were produced. Federal Theatre sponsored dance programmes, classical plays, musical revues, experimental dramas. In this decade Hall Johnson’s Run Little Chillun (1933), Rudolph Fisher’s Conjur Man Dies (1936), Peter Morell and Augustus Smith’s Turpentine (1936), Hugh Allison’s The Trial of Dr. Bake (1937) were notable productions. This period was masterly ruled by a great literary figure Langston Hughes. He was a poet, a dramatist, a short story writer and creator of negro legends. His play Mulatto opened in October 1935 and became the longest running play by a black playwright.
on broadway. His another play *Don’t you Want to be Free?* was produced by Harlem Suitcase Theatre.

Federal theatre was abolished by Congress in 1939. In 1940 American Negro Theatre (ANT) and the Negro Playwrights Company came into existence which helped black artists to continue their activities. Two plays *Big White Fog* (1938) and *Our Lan* (1947) by Theodore Ward were produced in 1940. Stage adaptation of Richard Wright’s controversial novel *Native Son*, Abram Hill’s *Onstrivers* (1940), Theodore Browne’s *Natural Man* (1940) also appeared in 1941.

The 1950s was an era of unprecedented black unity and intolerance.

“Plays during the 1950s expressed a new form of protest, one that not only exhorted Black people to stand up for their rights but warned Whites that Blacks would settle for nothing less than their full share of the American Dream”.

The noteworthy play in this period was Lorraine Hansbury’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. It was a domestic play depicting black family life. Two plays, *A Medal for Willie* and *In Splendid Error* by William Branch were produced in 1951 and 1954 respectively by the committee for the negro in the arts.

In 1950s, Louis Peterson’s *Take a Giant Step* (1953-59), Loften Mitchell’s *A Land beyond River* (1956), Theodore Ward’s *John Browne* (1950) were staged.
In 1960, black theatre entered the second black Renaissance. It brought a new revolution in its content and presentation of style to be aptly called Militant theatre or the theatre of Revolt. This theatre is primarily geared toward arousing black people to take aggressive action to change the state of their existence in the United States. The playwrights such as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and Ron Milner are some of the leading names of the theatre of 60s. During this decade Douglas Turner Ward’s *Day of Absence* and *Wapp Ending* (1965), Ronald Miller’s *Who’s Got His Won* (1966) Ed Bullin’s *Electric Nigger* (1967-68) were the major plays produced by the black playwrights. In 1980s August Willson emerges as a major playwright. For him, theatre as a media, documents social and racial realities of the Blacks. His major plays are *The Piano Lession, Fences, Joe Turners Come and Gone and Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Behind the revolutionary changes in the attitude and presentation style of the black playwrights, there were important reasons. Firstly, America was avoiding its national responsibility toward blacks. Secondly, the promises of emancipation and reconstruction had not been kept. The failures of Civil Rights Movement and the disillusionment that followed shaped a new concept of theatre for the black playwrights where theatre changed into a battlefield and a court. This change is perfectly noted by Genevieve Fabre when he says:

“Little by little the theatre changed into a court room where rage and hate erupted - and where whites were summoned to hear themselves
condemned - or into a battle-field where the rights of bloody revolution took place”.33

The playwrights of militant theatre waged a war against the whites. Being revolutionaries, they fought on cultural front, used theatre as a battlefield and words as bullets. These playwrights supported the idea of black nationalism based on the concept of a separate black nation.

Militant theatre is explosive in its nature and black artists use activist strategies to achieve their purposes. In this context, Mance Williams says:

“but the formula for Black Revolutionary Theatre is simple: Blacks are the protagonists, victims and classical heroes, while Whites are the antagonists, oppressors and major hostile forces destructive to Black aspirations”.34

Black Militant Theatre focuses on socio-political disorder and moral chaos of an oppressive society and becomes an instrument for the building of a black nation.

LeRoi Jones is the most explosive, the most controversial playwright and an exponent of militant theatre. His plays, The Slave, Arm Yrself or Harm Yrself indicate that blacks must follow the path of armed struggle. This theatre was created at the time of race-riots taking place in many cities. This theatre breaks the barrier between stage and audience and advocates close ties between them. The theatre of Revolt is the theatre of reality. Examining the struggle of blacks militant theatre intensifies the
conditions of victims and highlights new possibilities for change. LeRoi Jones, the chief exponent and the chief designer of this theatre, subscribes that “the Revolutionary Theatre should force change”.

Militant Theatre believes that every black is a potential revolutionist. Every action in this theatre is political which aims at a special emphasis on militant nationalism and cultural unity. Black playwrights represent tensions between the two races and suggest possible resolution to it. A leading playwright of this movement Ron Milner envisions this theatre as a prism of light that projects warnings, directions, memories or exemplary creations. He comments; “this new theatre must be housed in, sustained and judged by, and be a usable projection of, and to, a black community!”.

Similarly, leading black playwright Ed Bullins explains his ideas about the nature of revolutionary theatre. For him, this theatre seeks to expose the reality. Since whites are afraid of reality black playwrights must employ real and natural dramatic events from their life as their themes. In his words:

"the revolutionary nature of this theatre is not of style and technique... but of theme and character... so it is not a call for a return to realism or naturalism that this theatre calls for (sic) : it is the exposure of illusion through exploding myths and lies that are disguised in reality and truths”.

Militant Theatre is the theatre of revolt. By showing murders and blood, it prepares the audience for armed struggle. Using the techniques
like explosions, bullet firings, screaming and violence black playwrights bring about a revolution on the stage.

Black theatre is viewed as both, Theatre of Experience and Militant Theatre. Though both are different in their nature and expression, they stem from the same black consciousness. Theater of Experience emerges from the life experiences of the black people in America. Emphasizing the dynamism of black nature, it consciously records the life of blacks on plantations, in Ghettoes and on American land. It throws a subtle light on the race relations which lie at the core of the Theatre of Experience. The Theatre of Revolt or Militant Theatre is explosive in nature and holds the white man responsible for the misfortunes of the black community and puts him on trial.

Theater of Experience takes its organizing principles from African art-forms and African philosophy. Incorporation of the African traditions like masks, oral tradition, musical, dance and religious faiths indicate their conscious emphasis on the need for the restoration of their culture. It becomes necessary to understand the nature of black culture and as to how it has played a vital role in shaping the base of black literature in general and black theatre in particular.

African American theatre grows out of African American culture. Black playwrights consider culture as their key aspect to the subject matter. For them art and culture are inseparable. Art communicates the value
of culture. Culture, in a broad sense is said to be the set of things that we know that makes us civilized.

Maulana Ron Karenga, one of the leading black nationalists and theorists, in one of his speeches says: “Culture is the basis of all ideas, images and actions and to deal with the culture is to deal with the set of values given to you by your culture and without a culture Negroes are only a set of reactions to white people”. He proposed seven criterion for culture: Mythology, history, political organization, economic organization, social organization, creative motif and ethos.

One of the most interesting discussions on culture is found in Sekou Toure’s *Dialectical Approach to Culture*. In that paper, Toure defines culture as “consisting of all the works of art, and science, plus knowledge, manners, education, modes of thought, behaviors and attitudes of a people”.

For Toure culture is a superstructure built upon the material infrastructure of a given society and having the particular power, in turn, to shape that infrastructure and transform it. During slavery days, blacks had to go through the process of deculturization which means they were forced to accept the imposition of another culture. This process in a way was assassination of Africanness, the transformation of an African into a Negro.

Black playwrights toil hard to secure their culture by turning back to their African origin. They follow the art and culture which is full of
myths, legends, folk songs and folk instruments, preserved by their ancestors in Africa. It has rich tradition and it has been carried forward from generation to generations. The African artists are spirit worshippers. Therefore, art, for them, stands as a spiritual and creative force. It is an essential activity which emerges from the constant support of African philosophy.

In this context, Janheinz Jahn remarks:

“Art ... is in Africa a force, and the force is accordingly the essential not of the object, but the exercise of art. Art in Africa is never a thing but always an attitude or an activity. ....African philosophy stands consistently on the side of the artist”.40

The Yoruba sculptural God is the source of spirit of the African art. Africans consider their god as their ancestor-forefather. The force of this culture is expressed through mask which is not merely a wooden piece but an inner spirit and force. Africans believe that the mask possesses a power too.

This sculptural God which was said to be a man, stands for ancestral wisdom. African artists consider mask as an agent that secures their coherence. In Yoruba culture, mask miming is a ritual in which the audience registers their active participation.

To retain their cultural identity in the US, black artists consciously make use of the traditional African art forms. Traditional African
Theatre involves more than one creative form. It is a theatre of drums, song and dance which provides vigor and spirit of black culture. These forms are no doubt interlinked and are closely related to the dramatic form. These are traditional modes of expression of the blacks which compose black sensibility and cultural heritage. Olaudah Equiano very significantly explains how these forms are ingrained in the black consciousness. He says:

"We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle or other causes of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and Musicke suited to the occasion."  

The subtle relationship among these art-forms reveals the real nature of African aesthetics and forms the structure of art and culture of African people. These forms are, therefore, inter-linked and purely functional in nature.

For the blacks, drama as an art-form "seems to cover almost every form of social expression that may be said to incorporate movement and gesture: singing, drumming, dancing, all ceremonial behavior..... literally everything". Hence, song, dance and drum become the source of inspiration for the black playwrights.

African oral tradition has formulated and passed down the concepts of existence and essence through poems, songs, music and oral history. It holds a prominent place in African American culture. This tradition
has long remained a living practice in African American culture from which the black dramatists freely draw their inspiration.

During slavery period, this tradition was the safest means of communication and strategy for survival for the Blacks. The oral tradition manifests itself through various forms like the art of story-telling. The forms rely on improvisations with a particular emphasis on language, mime, voice and gesture. Genevieve Fabre observes, “In the theatre of oral expression, which encourages exchange and immediate response, serves as a model for patterns of participation and involvement”.43

Musical tradition is yet another most authentic expression of African American life. It is an individual as well as a group activity. In this regard Portia K. Maultsby observes:

“African music is integral to all aspects of black community life. It serves many functions and is performed by individuals and groups in both formal and informal settings. The fundamental concept that governs music performance in African and African derived culture is that music making is a participatory group activity that serves to unite black people into a cohesive group for a common purpose”.44

African music, as mentioned in Encyclopedia Britannica, is “Characteristically polyrhythmic (consisting of simultaneous, distinct rhythmic patterns) and polyphonic (consisting of simultaneous sounds or melodic lines)”.45
Musical tradition helps blacks to restore spirituality which is the governing principle of this music. Music has always been connected with various activities in the everyday life of the blacks.

The religious tradition is another important factor that has influenced black theatre in a special way. The music of black theatre is strongly influenced by the religious worship. The entire body of black music like spirituals, gospel songs stems from black church. It provides the theatre with a structure for drama. Musical tradition holds a pivotal place in day to day life of the blacks. It is the music that expresses hope for a better world. In the slavery days, it was the only media available for the blacks to express their pain and agony. Theater finds in religious tradition the spirit and hope for liberation. Natalie Curtis Burlin says:

“One must keep in mind that during slavery theatre like religious worship, occurred clandestinely. Secrecy added a subversive and distinctively black characteristic to the action. Far from the surveillance of whites, a ritual could be created that legitimized free expression and revived African beliefs. Each person could participate in the ceremony. From the very beginning, theatre and religious ritual have shared common features; the atmosphere of intense emotion in modern drama seeks to recreate the same conditions of ritual”.

Songs play a crucial role in the dynamics of black life. There are work songs, religious-songs, healing-songs, praise songs and blues which are sung on appropriate occasions. The majority of the songs adopt
the ‘call and response’ model which provides theatre a powerful device of interaction with the society. The black music, hence, has a polyphonic structure and also incorporates dramatization and dialogue pattern in music. The use of ‘call and response’ technique is one of the most striking characteristics of African American song tradition.

The role of dance in Yoruba culture and African theatre should be studied as an important manifestation in religious worship. Dance served a cultural function in early African American society. The dance and drums are integral parts of African American culture which ensure strength for black people to face all odds in their lives. African dance is participatory in nature and is often accompanied by drums. The African Americans “are a people of dance whose feet grow strong by beating upon the ground”.  

Dance secures their emotional world and also provides rhythm to their life. African dance has a polyphonic structure. It incorporates mime and mask, sound and spectacle. Using these elements, dance expresses the common features of African life.

Geoffery Gorer in his book African Dances describes this fact in following words:

“Africans dance for joy and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time”.

34
In Yoruba culture, the master dancer decides his dance steps and body rhythm as per the situation set by the master drummer. Thus, dance and drums are interlinked and always correspond to each other. A fine mixture of sound and movement is observed in African dance. Harmony and balance are the governing principles that have made these forms unique.

Like dances, drums too play an important role in African life. Drumbeats not only produce rhythm but also contribute to the total effect. African drum thus symbolizes the eternal and everlasting sound of the black culture. Drum is "cultural matrix" that interpreted the ancestral wisdom and transmitted it to the living. Drums, as Paul Harrison points out, "modulate the rhythms and the sounds that compose the hymn of the black community and creates a free song different from what the whites like to hear."\textsuperscript{50}

The black playwrights very consciously use these art forms to emphasize the importance of African culture. This is the only way for the Blacks to keep themselves sane and channelize the black man's violence and retain his humanity.

In order to have a desired effect black playwrights consciously employ myths, rituals and rites by which as LeRoi believes, this theatre will create black magic. He states:

"All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves".\textsuperscript{51}
Several playwrights like Ed Bullins, LeRoi Jones, Kalamu Ya Saleem have focused special attention to rituals. Baraka’s plays, Madhearts, Bloodrite strongly suggest ritual as a controlling element. Kalamu Ya Saleem’s play The Destruction of the American Stage was published under a label A Black Ritual.

Ritual has been a motivating force in the African life. This ceremony is deeply ingrained in their social life. It is a group activity in which religious ceremonies take place in a mysterious atmosphere. “The collective character of the ritual makes it an instrument for cementing the unity of group and for integrating individuals”.

Ritual expresses cosmic harmony. The group takes possessions of the place and the participants worship their God in order to restore harmony between man and the universe. In this ceremony dance and music play vital role. In short, ritual is “a communal art, a unifying link, a mobilizer, a rallying point where commands for struggle are transmitted”.

Ritual becomes a means for the blacks to realize the fulfillment of their life. The scenic designing and choreography of the ritual create a new theatre language on the stage where the audience realize the communion with the universe of their own.

In African American theatre, ritual is used in a modern sense. Rituals have been performed by the Spirit House and Lafayette Theatre as a
new mode of expression in theatre. It releases psychic liberating energy. The celebration of ritual is accomplished with the final burst of energy. LeRoi Jones, in his play *Slave Ship*, has made apt use of the ritual. In LeRoi Jones's *Slave Ship* the theme of the cursed ship is woven out with the help of mythical implication. Integration of dance, song, drums and Yoruba language support the total effect in both the ways, as theatre techniques and also as traditional forms of African culture.

Myth is essential to ritual. It helps the group to define its past. It has been a recurring element in the African American plays. Fabre says that the myth, "both historical and metaphysical, acts out the image of a group in relation to its past and to the outer world. African American playwrights freely borrow myths from African legacy and their historical past".54

To create different moods and environment, black playwrights integrate music, song and drum into dramatic action. One of the leading black playwrights, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), in his play *Slave Ship*, very effectively infuses drumbeats to enhance the effect of the play. Using the traditional forms like dance, drums and chattles, the tempo of the play is accelerated to intensify the theme of victimization and suppression of the blacks by the whites. It is a technique employed by the playwright that creates violence and tension more effectively than words. The intensity of the scene reaches to its height as "drums come up, but they are walls and
floors being beaten. Chains rattled... Women begin to moan and chant songs with scraping of floor and chains for accompaniment". However, these three forms i.e. drums, dance and song, create their own text.

Eventhough these forms are musical in nature, black playwrights make them visible and insist on their actual participation in the play. As a result these form do not remain merely supportive background to the drama but allow itself to melt in the chemistry of the play. All these instruments and their different forms compose the scene of black theatre.

Black theatre is a severe break from the mainstream American theatre. The theme of black theatre is blackness or black experience. It serves as a tool for search for ethnic identity. It is the most appropriate means to express artistically the conditions of the blacks in the US created from the most fundamental aspects of African American life. The basic experiences in the life of the black people recur in the theatre whose goal is to show the common features of black life and perspectives. This kind of theatre is dedicated to the community which is construed around the double perspective of destroying the cosmic order imposed by dominant ideology and of developing its own relevant system. Micheal W Kaufman says in this connection that “the black playwrights attempt to dramatize the inner need of the people in order to shape the drama of their life and have coincidentally reshaped the life of their drama”.

38
Black theatre sets out to change the world view developed by the dominant white society. It offers the promise of another world, the world of Eastern values and African philosophy. Black theatre begins with confrontation. Black people come face to face with the reality of their painful experiences in the United States. On this platform, blacks are reminded of how they were enslaved by the whites, and how they became their victims. Black playwrights believe that the theater is the arena where the destiny of the blacks can be staged. While talking about important functions of drama, George Houston Bass remarks: “Drama is inclusive of all people and provides a way of giving aesthetic structure to human action. Drama represents the conflicts and reveals the life”.57

For the black playwrights, theater becomes a platform for arguments, confrontations and communication. Black theatre, converting itself from an entertaining place into an arena of moral instruction, ties a strong bond with the black audience. Edward Murrow strongly believes that: “the theatre is not merely a place of amusement. I believe it can be a great educational medium, teaching an audience many things that would otherwise be lost to them. It widens the sympathies and broadens the intellect and sweetens the hearts”.58

By bringing together traditional cultural elements in art, black theatre shows blacks as a people and a nation. The structure of black theatre is designed with a specific purpose to interact with its society. It draws the spirit and vigour directly from the black community. Ron Milner’s definition
offers a clear idea of black theatre. He puts it in the following words: “Coming out of the life experiences of the black people in America; its focus is black people and comes exclusively from black playwrights with black audience as reference”.

Drawing its true inspiration from black people, black theatre is dedicated to the black society. Ed Bullins, a black playwright sees black theatre, “not as a theatre of the Lip... hustling America, but a people’s theatre, dedicated to the continuing survival of black people”.

The emergence of black theatre is a strong reaction of the blacks against the socio-political, economic and cultural oppression. To liberate themselves and their community from the white imposition, black artists must understand and reveal the history of the community. Without sense for his past and history a black man can not have any idea of his cultural origins and strength which will lead him only to the damnable present, sufferings, pains and injustice. It is a fact that sense of history “gives them a kind of measurement as to where they have been and where they are”.

History helps blacks to know who they are and what they have to do to make themselves free. With the help of their historical past, blacks go thousand years back to the soil of Africa, put on the traditional African masks and enjoy their Yoruba culture. To be with the past, for them, is a renovation and reclaimed of their selfhood an experience of purity.
It is only on the magical platform of theatre that blacks can take a historical ride. Theater with its audio-visual capacity enables the black artists to create a theatrical cosmos which interacts with the black literary textual cosmos and the black artists, with the given text, using all traditional art-forms of Africa, pull history back in action. Genevieve Fabre, very significantly explains theatre's relationship with time and history. He says:

"As a space where people can be confronted by their history, theatre reshapes and energizes the past. It brings back ancestral myths, defuses painful experiences, heals certain wounds and revives racial pride and solidarity". 62

On the enchanted platform of theatre history can be re-enacted and characters can be re-created. In black theatre, every movement on the stage becomes symbolic. With every black beam of light, coming from every corner of the stage, past memories are revisualised. The music reminds the audience the eternal tunes of Yoruba culture of Africa and the whole effect is transferred into a ritual.

The concept of black theatre, so well established, has rich connotations. The term black theatre is self-explanatory and yet needs to be explained. To confront black theatre is to confront reality which is full of conflicting feelings and ideas. Black playwrights must have experienced this conflict 'within'. Theater provides for them a platform for expressing these conflicting ideas. Black playwrights strongly believe that drama has always proved to be a very exciting and popular platform not only to those
who take part in it, but also for those who observe it. Its popularity is ensured by its artistic superiority and capacity in projecting wonderful live moments. It is considered as the unbroken line of experience.

Peter Brooks, a world famous director, in his book *The Empty Space* studies the function of theatre. He aptly says that “there can not be any doubt that theatre is essentially a special place. It is like a magnifying glass. It is also like a reducing lens”.

Just like a microscopic lense, black theatre examines the situations and actions of the black community more thoroughly than any other art form and magnifies the substance and inner world of the black community enhancing its artistic value.

Black theatre, sometimes called African American theatre, is a theatre written by and for black Americans. It partakes of an African and Caribbean heritage on one side, and of Western tradition on the other. Africa and Caribbean have given a background of ritual and theatrical entertainments often closely related to religious ceremonies.

The span of African American drama and theatre is of less than two hundred years. The beginning is related to the lucrative slave trade, when the Africans were sold as slaves to the new world. They brought with them their cultural heritage their languages, cultures, stories, religions, music, dance and the knowledge of drums, harps and pipes. The development and
growth of the black theatre from 1920's up to this decade, have created altogether a separate theatre world. It is a departure from the traditional American theatre, in respect of themes and techniques. It is designed with a special purpose for the black community in particular and the white audience in general.

Therefore, Black playwrights speak their minds and hearts in different tones and ways. Racial conflicts, duel consciousness, victimization of the blacks by the whites, a total war against the racial oppression have formed the general theme of this theatre. By giving different shades to their stage vision, these playwrights project black experience. A strong black psyche is the backbone of the black theatre which leads them to the reclamation of their cultural heritage, African roots, self realization and a sense of unity among the people.

To achieve this, the Black playwrights are committed to certain priorities. This theatre has to be functional, collective, instructive and analytical. It should have an awareness of the historical truths and cultural heritage. These priorities are self- explanatory in respect of the nature and purpose of the black theatre movement. The evolution of the black theatre, therefore, goes hand in hand with different movements of the blacks.

While studying the themes of African American plays, it will be necessary to understand how these playwrights have applied theatre techniques from different angles. Technique is inseparable from the visual
language of the text in theatre such as setting, lighting, movements, music, rituals, myths, composition, which gives tone and texture to the content of the theme. Technique, in a way, is the physical form of the content. Black playwrights apply technique according to their themes which are essentially different from the traditional norms. They use technique to transform social reality into theatrical reality. Technique is a way of doing an activity requiring skill, in the arts, sports science etc.

Black Theatre elaborates its own dramatic structure from modes of representation, communication and reception. In Black Theatre the text is no longer thought of as an ensemble of signs meant for a single performance, but a step toward the creation of a theatrical event. The emphasis is on the non-verbal and scenic material aimed at creating a ‘total theatre’. Using different cultural references, Andrei Serban, Maredith Monk, Richard Foreman and Bob Wilson have given importance to choreography and to visual and sonorous elements. Black playwrights use special theatrical compositions to achieve special effects and boost and strengthen the unity of the black community. The special way of blocking, entry-exit, supported by a special use of sounds and lights and an emphasis on group activities are some of the important techniques employed by the black playwrights. The new Black playwrights seem no longer interested in a theatre of texts. The primacy of word has been replaced by a drama created out of the special language of voice and body.
The purpose of this dissertation is to study, analyze and examine the themes and techniques used by the Black playwrights in general and in the plays of these major three playwrights: Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones and August Wilson in particular. In the light of their contribution to the Black Theatre Movement in America, an attempt has been made to study these playwrights as the major spokespersons of the Black's community and their psyche. The experimentations in the theatre media, the artistic crises faced by them while using the theatre as the theatre of commitment, their achievements and failures, the autobiographical elements peeping through their plots and the factors responsible for shaping their creative genius - have all been taken into account in the assessment of these writers and their writings.
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21. Davis, p.3.
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