AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM THE 1930s TO 1993: THE MAINSTREAMING THRUST

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Abstract

From 1773 to the 1930s, African American writers strove for their literature to achieve letters patent of nobility. However, this was only a stage toward recognition and acceptance of that literature by Americans themselves and the world at large. From the protest literature produced in the 1930s to the explosion of literature by women in the 1990s, African Americans have written in the highest standard of art as set by white Americans as well as educate white America to the needs and aspirations of blacks to reach the mainstream, winning, in the process, awards including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the New York Drama Critics Award and even a Nobel Prize in 1993, which can be said to symbolize this recognition.

Key words

African American literature; Protest literature; Pulitzer Price; National Book Awards, New York Drama Critics Awards; Nobel Prize;

INTRODUCTION

Some people may wonder about the usefulness of a survey of African-American literature. After all, books by people of African descent in America are read throughout the world. Yet, experience shows that many people here in Africa have a poor knowledge of black American. This clearly explains the need for this article and for "African-American Literature from 1619 to the 1940s: Achieving Letters Patent of Nobility"[1], which can be considered as the first part of the survey. The latter and this paper should be of considerable value for the general reader who wishes to gain a historical overview of African-American writing and for students beginning research on that field.

When one considers the works of black Americans since 1773, including those of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. Dubois and the rich production of the Harlem Renaissance, one can assert that by the 1930s, black American literature does exist as a separate body of literature. Indeed, works by blacks have yet to appear in American literary anthologies. However, social and political forces were bringing sweeping changes. This paper examines black American literature from the 1930s to the 2000s. It argues that despite some nationalist trends, black writers in that era generally worked to have their works accepted by mainstream America and succeeded in that endeavor. The paper does not claim to be comprehensive and deal with all the writers of the periods in review. It just highlights some of the social and historical facts that have shaped the literature of black Americans and some of the writers who have had a lasting influence. The paper covers first the 1930s and 40s, then the period from 1950 to 1975 and lastly the period from 1975 to 1993.

A - THE PROTEST ERA: 1930-1950

The crash of the stock market in October 1929 marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance and the beginning of the Great Depression. It was the worst economic crisis in American history and it came at a time when America thought it was a super power. The most disadvantaged and

[1] Konan Amani, "African-American Literature from 1619 to the 1940s: Achieving Letters Patent of Nobility" in *Particip'Action*, Lomé, Vol.3 – N°1 (January 2011), pp. 53-73.

desperate major group during that Depression was certainly black landless farmers and workers in rural areas. The lot of African Americans in cities was not better. A large migration movement of blacks which began during World War I had led them to settle in large cities and find jobs in industries and other sectors of the economy. As the Depression hit, the unemployed figures for Americans blacks, according to Urban League reports, were 30 to 60 percent greater than for whites as black domestics, teachers, nurses, and factory workers lost their jobs. Not only were whites generally given preference for available jobs, but blacks were dismissed in some areas traditionally held by them. They were dismissed as elevator operators, bellboys, cooks, waiters, and delivery boys and replaced by whites.

The Roosevelt administration launched the New Deal whose agency the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was most beneficial to black writers. Established in 1935 as a subdivision of the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Writers' Project supported more than six thousand writers among whom Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, Frank Yerby, Zora Neal Hurston, Margaret Walker, to name just a few. The FWP used the talents of unemployed people to do government work. The trials and tribulations brought about by the new environment, namely, unprecedented poverty and discrimination, shaped African American literature of the era, the protest literature.

1 – PROTEST LITERATURE

In 1940, Richard Wright published *Native Son,* which is perhaps the most controversial book in African American literature, and became a symbol. One critic has hailed *Native Son* as marking the birth of the modern black American novel[2]. Before 1940, protest novels were cast in the vein of what Schraufnagel terms "the apologetic tradition," depicting heroic blacks physically victimized by white racism. While still showing how social, political, and economic forces deprive blacks, Wright added a psychological dimension to the protest form. He put much emphasis on the feelings and the thoughts of the character which eventually lead to an explosive situation.

[2] Noel Schraufnagel, "Introduction," *The Black American Novel: From Apology to Protest*. Deland: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1973, p. ix.

Wright's significance in African American literature can be judged by what follows. In a national poll of 38 black writers in 1965, more than half named Richard Wright as the most important black writer of all time. His book was translated from English into other languages: German, Russian and Spanish in 1941; Swedish in 1943, Czech, Dutch and French in 1947, Portuguese in 1949, Rumanian in 1954, Danish in 1959, Polish in 1969, Georgian in 1971, Japanese in 1972, and Turkish in 1975. Wright became the first black writer to live off his writing. The book was, and still is, both widely condemned and praised. However, the work that first brought Wright to attention was *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), a collection of short stories. The stories, like the novel, depict the injustices suffered by blacks at the hand of whites. The black characters are forced into violence by fortuitous incidents brought about by the tense relationships between the two races. Thus, the writing of that period emphasized social protest to complain about the plight of blacks.

Protest literature has been criticized as propaganda because it appeals to emotion rather than logic. A term used by literary critics to describe it is "agitprop," short for agitation and propaganda. That way of writing was wrongly called the Wrightian school, to stress the influence of Richard Wright on the movement. Yet, while *Native Son*'s influence has undoubtedly been great, it is certainly more accurate to say that the other black authors who wrote protest were responding to the same sociological environment as Richard Wright. Ann Petry's *The Street*, the first novel by an African American to sell more than a million copies, for example, was published in 1940, the same year as *Native Son*. *The Street* chronicles a young black woman's struggle to live and raise her son by herself amid the violence, poverty, and racial segregation of Harlem in the 1940s.

Many other writers came to prominence in the same period. With *Blood on the Forge* (1941), William Attaway laid bare the social and psychological problems blacks experienced after migrating from the rural South to the industrial North. With *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), his first novel, the story of Bob Jones, a black foreman victim of racism in a North American shipyard during World War II, Chester Bomar Himes became a proponent of protest literature. However, he won acclaim not for writing protest but for producing hard-boiled thrillers featuring two black policemen, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, which

earned him the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière in 1958 and the Columbus Foundation award in 1982. In all these novels, social determinism is obvious: the protagonists' lives depend mostly on the environment, chance or heredity.

The poets also wrote in the protest vein. Consider for example Margaret Walker's *For my People* (1942), a collection of poem, which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition in 1942. The collection focuses not only on the hardship that African Americans have endured, but goes beyond black people to claim more justice for disadvantaged people. Langston Hughes in *Freedom's Plow* (1943) extols freedom and asserts that all races should enjoy it. Gwendolyn Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) denounces the effects of oppression and difficult living conditions on the lives of blacks and their fight against segregationist and discriminatory practices both in daily life and in the armed forces. While protest literature may be considered as the most visible form of writing by blacks, it was by no means the only one.

2- "RACELESS" NOVELS

What may appear paradoxical in that era when African American writers were denouncing racism is that "raceless" novels, that is, novels by blacks but featuring white protagonists, were also published in the same period by black writers. Perhaps the most popular and prolific of these was Frank Yerby (he wrote thirty three novels), who framed his historical fiction in the vein of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Most of his works are set in the antebellum South. Yerby is easily dismissed when one discusses black American literature. As Darwin Turner asserts,

> [Black] scholars no longer read Frank Yerby. Or if they do, they refuse to admit the fact publicly. They have reason to ignore him, for he has refused to fit comfortably in any of the cherished stereotypes.
> … The university critics could not use him. Who looks for myths, archetypes, ironies, absurdism, existentialism, or complicated personae in a writer so transparent that ordinary people read him voluntarily? And why read a writer whom everybody can understand? It was better to dismiss him quickly as a "prince of pulpsters" who would not be considered seriously if he were not a Negro. Perhaps, if ignored, he, like television, might go away. [3]

[3] Darwin Turner, "Frank Yerby as a Debunker" in *The Massachusetts Review*. Vol. 9 N°. 3 (Summer 1968), p. 569.

Thus, Yerby is very rarely discussed in black criticism. Yet both his short stories, written in the protest tradition and his costume novels constitute a significant contribution to African American literature[4]. In addition, he stands as the first African American to write a best-selling novel and to have a book purchased by Hollywood for a film adaptation with *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946). Like his subsequent novels, *The Foxes of Harrow* portrays an adventurer who sets home, marries, becomes wealthy and loses that wealth in the course of his life. As the novel closes, he is ready to start all over.

Another noteworthy writer of raceless fiction of the 1940s is Willard Motley. His *Knock on Any Door* (1947) depicts the story of Nick Romano, the son of Italian immigrants, who because of poverty brought about by the Depression, commits petty crimes and ends up murdering a policeman and being executed at the age of 21. At a remove of almost sixty years, the motivations of the authors of these novels with white protagonists are difficult to understand. Did they feel ill at ease with the protest tradition? Or were they already feeling or anticipating the wind of change? At any rate, the raceless vein paved the way for new developments in black literature in the fifties.

B – TOWARD THE MAINSTREAM: 1950 TO 1975

In that period, several overlapping literary trends replaced the Wrightian novel. That change had one reason, the change of atmosphere in America. President Truman's interracial committee on civil rights made recommendations to end racism. A result of these recommendations was that 30 percent of the US forces in the Korean War (1950-51) was black even though the black population in US accounts for only 10 percent. In 1954, in the Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, case, the Supreme Court announced its landmark desegregation decision that the doctrine of "separate but equal" in public education was unconstitutional. A year later, seeing no change in their lives, blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., boycotted the city bus, thus launching the first post-war

[4] Konan Amani, "Frank Yerby's Contribution to African American Literature" in *RIVEA* N°. 1 (September 1995), pp. 1-9.

direct action movement of the masses, organized and led by blacks themselves. Blacks thought they were going to be accepted at last by mainstream America.

1 – THE WRITERS FROM 1950 TO 1960

As a result of the new climate, there was a general move away from protest literature. Here three groups can be distinguished. The first is symbolized mainly by Frank Yerby and Willard Motley, who were already writing in the non-racial vein in the 1940s, and saw their choice confirmed and responded with other similar productions. Yerby added *The Vixens* (1947), *The Golden Hawk* (1948) *Pride's Castle* (1949) *Captain Rebel* (1955) *Gillian* (1960), to name just a few of his many novels, to *The Foxes of Harrow* while Motley published *We fished All Night* (1951), which deals with the effects of war, in this instance, World War II, on the lives of people.

The second group comprises protest writers who were not insensitive to the general climate which promised better days for African Americans. These writers either shifted their emphasis on race or embraced the raceless fashion. Thus, While Chester Himes' *Cast the First Stone* (1952) deals with homosexual love in prison and Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954), with a white character who marries a prostitute then murders her avoided the black character as the main protagonist, Ann Petry, in *The Narrows* (1953), focuses on race ambiguity, rather than on race per se, and on human relationship as characters hit their identities and seek revenge against those who frustrate them.

The third group of writers, who were new on the literary scene, openly challenged the protest tradition. Relegating social elements to a secondary position, they examined the individual problems of blacks fighting to enter the mainstream of American Life rather than denounce racism as an institution. The aim of the protagonists in the works of these accommodationist writers is to find a comfortable place in life without trying to change the structure of society controlled by whites. The writers of that era put the emphasis on blacks' similarities to other American ethnic groups. They tried and succeeded in showing they could write as artistically as whites, earning awards in the process. In his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1952) for which he is better known, James Baldwin explores the psychological

problems of members of a black family. With only one novel ever, *Invisible Man* (1952), which deals with many and varied themes as black identity, the hypocrisy of some blacks and whites, the significance of the South in the lives of blacks, Ralph Ellison, the other notable novelist of this era, is credited with writing one of the most, if not the most, significant African American book. *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award in 1953. Lorraine Hansberry, too, won an award, the New York Drama Critics Award, with her play *A raisin in the Sun* (1959). This play is the story of a family, the Youngers, trying to fulfill their American Dream. The play enjoyed a long run on Broadway. As for Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959), it denounces the alienation that blacks are the victims of as they devote too much attention to money.

2 – THE WRITERS FROM 1960 TO 1975

Unlike in the 1950s, two distinct and overlapping literary trends can be distinguished in this period: one represented by those I termed "traditionalist writers" and the Black Arts Movement.

2.1 – Traditionalist Writers

This term is by no means pejorative. It is used, for lack of a better one, to distinguish these writers from those of the Black Arts Movement. The traditionalist writers were most often the same as those above who were, or started, writing in the 1950s. They were now more matured and tried to write in the highest standard of art as set by white Americans as well as educate white America to the needs and aspirations of blacks. However, protest is not absent from this literary trend. The promises of the change of atmosphere in America, symbolized by the Supreme Court's desegregation-in-schools decision, have not materialized. This is how one can explain the return of the apologetic protest tradition, which now shows talented protagonists attempting to advance socially, confronting directly white authority and being victimized by it. Noel Schraufnagel credits two writers, John A. Williams and Ernest J. Gaines, with developing

the apologetic trend from the 1940s into a more respectable art form. Of Williams and Gaines, Schraufnagel writes:

> [They] gave new life to the trend by presenting protagonists who were less idealized than the typical characters of an earlier era. Rather than dealing with romantic individuals who are destroyed by a white mob, apologetic novels of the sixties depicted Negroes who merely tried to escape from poverty and injustice. In rebelling from the denial of their human dignity, they were not the victims of violence, but of the more subtle types of racism. These characters struggled against oppression on an individual basis with a definite goal in mind.[5]

Certainly, Tucker Caliban in William Melvin Kelly's *A Different Drummer* (1969) fits Schraufnagel's description. Caliban, destroys his farm and leaves, setting off a mass exodus of all the blacks of the state in the novel as a result of frustrations caused by whites. The blacks, deprived of their rights, leave in search of a dignity that is denied them by white society.

Schraufnagel's description is however only partially right when his description is applied to the character of Marcus in Ernest James Gaines' *Of Love and Dust* (1967). Indeed, Schraufnagel fails to notice that Marcus has also some of the reactions of the Wrightian protagonist who, he says, "strikes back at an oppressive and unjust society through an act of violence, which tends to provide a satisfaction that was otherwise lacking."[6] Even though he does not use violence, Marcus does strike back in order to get revenge. Schraufnagel also fails to take into account Jim Kelly, both a character and narrator in *Of Love and Dust*, who, like the protagonists in accommodationist novels, is solely concerned, in most part of the novel, in adjusting to the special problems created by racism around. Through these two characters, Marcus and Kelly, Gaines can be said to fuse the protest, accommodationist, and apologetic trends. In his other books published in the same period, the novel *Catherine Carmier* (1964) and the short story collection *Bloodline* (1968), Gaines still depicts protagonists who try to escape from poverty and injustice imposed on them by the racist environment.

The Man Who Cried I am (1967) by John Alfred Williams is couched in the same vein. Set in the 1960s, the novel chronicles the life of Max Reddick, an intelligent and uncompromising talented writer, who leaves America in an attempt to shackle off the limitations

[5] Noel Schraufnagel, op. cit., p. xiii.
[6] Ibid., p. 23.

on his life because he is black. In John Oliver Killens' *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962), the protagonist, Solomon Sanders, an educated black man rejects the opportunity to become an officer in the army and chooses black activism. Another great novelist of the era is Margaret Walker who received critical acclaim with *Jubilee* (1966). The work is an account of the life Vyry Brown, a slave girl fathered by her white slave master. This novel is based on Walker's grandmother's life as a slave. While traditionalist writers can be said to protest against the way blacks were treated by whites, this protest was somewhat subdued. The Black Arts Movement writers were more open and radical in their demands.

2.2 - The Black Arts Movement

Writers of that movement wrote for a black audience on only black subjects to educate black audiences to an awareness of their needs for liberation. They used styles and materials derived from black culture. They wanted their works to be judged only by critics sympathetic to their movement and willing to use a black aesthetic in judging. The Black Arts Movement was consciously political and intended to be an expression of black militancy and black cultural nationalism. It can be considered as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. The first is concerned with the relationship between art and politics and the second with the art of politics. Some of the writers adopted new names, generally African names, as they became more politically committed. Hence, Leroi Jones became first Amiri Imamu Baraka, then Amiri Baraka. His two plays published in one volume as *Dutchman and the Slave* (1964) depict violent racial conflict between blacks and whites. Don L. Lee, too, changed his name as Hakhi Madhubuti. He published *Black Pride* (1968), a collection of poems in which he expresses his pride at being black. Madhubuti contributed much to African American literature. An advocate of independent black institutions, he established Third World Press in 1967, probably the most important black-owned press in the United States today. Another notable name of the Black Arts Movement is Nikki Giovanni whose book of poetry, *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment* (1968), shows her militancy but also deals with more personal and universal themes as love, loss and loneliness. Like Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez is an influential member of the Black Arts Movement. Her collection of poems, *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) depicts the lives of common

black people and uses urban black vernacular, an example of which is the title of the book. Here, Sanchez subverts the word bad to mean good. The strong presence of women in the Black Arts Movement could be seen a sign of better days for female writers in the years to come.

C. THE WOMEN'S ERA: 1975 TO 1995

1 - THE WOMEN

The period from 1975 onward has been dominated by women. This is an achievement considering that not one black woman writer and not one female protagonist were accorded a worthy status in the black literary world prior to the 1970's. This does not mean women did not produce before that date. For example, Gwendolyn Brooks published *Annie Allen*, a collection of poems, in 1949 and became the very first black author to win the Pulitzer Prize. Lorraine Hansberry and Paule Marshall also authored *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* respectively. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who develops inferiority complex feelings because she is dark-skinned and does not have blue eyes, was published before the period under study. Neither does my classification mean that the women's works constitute a distinctive literary tradition. Black women, speaking with many voices and expressing many individual opinions, have been nearly unanimous in their insistence that their own emancipation cannot be separated from the emancipation of their men. Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of the life of the black community. Thus, as public interest began to shift in the early 70's from the rights of blacks to the rights of women, publishers became more receptive to the voices of black women writers and novels by Margaret Walker, Paule Marshall, Kristin Hunter, Alice Walker, Alice Childress, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara, among the better known, were all published before the end of 1983. These women writers are concerned with themes like racism, sexism, love, power, autonomy, creativity, manhood and womanhood in the black community.

The publications of these writers are well known, especially those of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Toni Morrison's *Song of Salomon* (1977) is the life story of Macon Dead III, nicknamed "Milkman". The book won her the National Books Critics Award and was cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding her the Nobel Prize in literature for 1993. Morrison won another prize, the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, with *Beloved* (1987). The novel is about Sethe, a slave mother who flees from her master. When she is caught and has to return into slavery, she kills her daughter and tries to kill her other children to save them from slavery. Before rising to prominence as an award-winning author, Toni Morrison worked as an editor for Random House and helped to promote African American literature. Another famous female writer is Alice Walker who won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award with *The Color Purple* (1982). The novel, which was adapted into a film and musical, relates the story of Celie, a young black woman who is abused first sexually by her stepfather and later physically by her husband. Gloria Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) explores the lives and relationships of black men and women in an urban environment. The book won the National Book Award in the First Novel category. Still in the same period, Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize in 1987 with her book of poems, *Thomas and Beulah,* which depicts the effects of society on people of a different race. Dove became later Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995. Given the rich production of women from 1975, one can indeed say that the period is theirs. However, this does not mean that men are completely absent.

2 – THE MEN

Men did not just stop writing because women were in vogue. Writers like Charles Wright's *Country Music* (1982) and *Black Zodiac* (1997), John Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) and *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) or Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old men* (1983) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), winner of a MacArthur Prize, or August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1990) and *Fences* (1987), Pulitzer-winning plays, experiment with modern forms of slave narratives, romance, fable and satire, tapping the roots of African American culture and institutions such as black music, speech, religion and the family as the foundation of

contemporary African American culture. They focus on excellence in writing and keep protest in the background while presenting blacks as people like other Americans.

CONCLUSION

Some readers would certainly complain for not finding their favorite authors or books in the compilation. Indeed, why are books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, a Pulitzer Prize winner, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange, or authors like Maya Angelou who read a poem at Bill Clinton's inauguration not mentioned? Or why are critics absent? Or where are the anthologies? The space here does not allow for all significant authors or books to be treated. Therefore, choices had to be made. And choosing, as one knows, is highly subjective. At any rate, since by 1993, books by black writers in America have been bestsellers, have won many awards and been taught in universities in the United States and throughout the world, one would not be wrong is asserting that African American literature had reached the mainstream. A symbol of that mainstream may be seen in Toni Morrison's achievement in winning the Nobel Prize.

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