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Do Black (Afro-American) Writers Deserve A Separate Literary Compartment? (With Special Focus on Black Women Writers)

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ABSTRACT

In today's world literature has been compartmentalized into several categories according to the region, religion, main themes, social or political views and various perspectives of the writers. The study of such categories gives us an insight into the inner workings of literary hierarchy and a glimpse of a specific writer's style of writing.

What is Black (Afro-American) Literature: Introduction:

Afro-American literature is a body of work that is created by the Black Americans with African roots, living in the United States. These Black Americans were born of Black African people who were brought into this land of freedom, as slaves by the White folks. These unfortunate Black people were made to do very harsh labor and underwent extreme torture of every kind imaginable. These writers brought alive the memories of the oppression, the racial abuse, the inequality and the extremely harsh circumstances in which their ancestors lived. These works also reflect the still prevalent racial discrimination faced by the Black community in the everyday life of America. These works are as old as American independence. They share many commonalities and also are as varied as the shades of Afro -American history and life. These works demand equality, democracy and justice, for the Black Community, in a feverish tone. Another important feature of these works is the oral songs incorporated into their writings. These have a huge significance in the African culture and have found a place in Afro American literature.

Residing on the margins of an economically powerful and prosperous America, Blacks usually find living life, quite hard a task. The discrimination faced by them in everyday life, brings out the deep anguish buried in their souls which gets doubled with the memories of the past crimes against their community. African American literature as mentioned earlier is as old as American independence. Among the significant writers of early Afro-American literature, the name of Phillis Wheatley (1753-84) comes first who published her poetical work, Poems on Various Subjects in 1773, three years before the American independence. She was from Senegal, Africa, caught and sold into slavery at the age of seven. With help from her adopted family, she became proficient in English by the age of sixteen. Many Whites could never believe that a slave girl could be so sophisticated as to write poetry. She was accused of falsehood and of plagiarizing poetry. She was even dragged to court where she had to defend herself and was made to prove its authenticity. She suffered this way because the color of her skin was Black. Her defense at the court is taken as one of the first recognitions of the achievements of the Blacks as poets and

artists and more importantly the coming home of Afro American literature.

Sojourner Truth (1779-1883) is one of the most famous voices of African American women. She was for the Abolitionists and Women's Rights Activists. She herself was born a slave as Isabella Baumfree and had suffered huge physical and mental torture. She gave herself the name Sojourner Truth in 1843. Her words, her writings inspired the whole Black community. She became a Methodist, stating: The spirit calls me and I must go. Her best known impromptu speech on racial inequalities (Ain't I a woman?) was delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio and has continued to inspire whole generations till date.

Another prominent writer of the same era was Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806). He became the first published Black American writer with his poem, An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries, as a broadside in 1761. His ode to Phillis Wheatley is also significant. He is remembered even today for his speech, Address to the Negroes of the State of New York, from 1786. In this speech he optimistically proclaims that Negroes would not be stopped from entering heavens due to their huge sacrifices and sufferings. He also articulately points out to his people that if slavery had to be demolished, it had to be done in a gradual way as it is deeply ingrained in the American society and the people's psyche. William Wells Brown and Victor Sejour too made an impact on the literature of those times. However the honor of being the first Afro American novelist rests with Harriet Wilson. Her Nig (1859) is the first novel of this literature and which talks about the miserable lives of the freed slaves of the North.

In the next phase of Afro-American literature termed as Slave Narratives, some six thousand freed Black slaves wrote about their harsh existence chronicling their problems in an exhaustive way. These write ups especially those written between 1845 and the Civil War gained much currency and helped the cause for the abolition of slavery. Hence the advocates of slavery dismissed them as handiwork of the White abolitionists, made up to gain sympathy for their cause. This gave rise to the practice of some prominent White author, having to confirm the character, integrity and honesty of that Black slave and authenticity of his or her work. This

phenomenon was called a black message inside a white envelope.

In the post slavery stages of Afro American literature the noteworthy writers were W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey. Paul Dunbar is one of the most respected names among the lot and was the first to become famous nationally all over America. He wrote in the Black American dialect. He was a prolific writer whose writings provided a penetrating glimpse into the lives of his rural folks. He died at a young age. *Jogging Erlong*, *Uncalled*, *The Fanatics* are some of his well known works.

In the fourth era of Afro-American literature, called Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940, was a renaissance in the true sense. Since the 1920's Harlem had become a huge residential area for African Americans, on the northern part of New York's Manhattan borough, which was originally a Dutch village set up in 1658. This particular renaissance phase went beyond literature and spread to music (jazz) and theatre. The most celebrated names here are those of Langston Hughes and Zora N Hurston, who became icons of their age. The Black literature or for that matter Black performance art was enjoyed mainly by Blacks till this time, but with Harlem Renaissance, the mainstream American culture and society began accepting it and even enjoyed reading and watching it. This was the most remarkable phenomenon of the history of Black African-American literature.

The next interesting phase was Civil Rights movement era. A large number of Black people migrated out of the racially abusive atmosphere of the South and settled in the northern cities like Chicago. Here they found work in the factories and other jobs and were relatively secure. This migration added to the confidence of the Blacks and a whole new lot of creativity was evidenced during this time. One of the most outstanding writers was James Baldwin, who wrote about his personal choices of being a Black and a homosexual. This was an extremely deplorable thing for the Americans of the time. His most famous work was the novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, in all he wrote twenty books, among them, *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time* are considered classics. Baldwin almost worshipped Richard Wright, who was for him, the greatest Black writer. Richard Wright was known for *Native Son* (1940) which tells the story of Bigger Thomas who is struggling to get accepted in Chicago. Baldwin impressed with it, named one of his collections of essays as *Notes of a Native Son*. Interestingly their friendship soured with Baldwin's criticism of his once, best writer in the world, in an essay, *Everybody's Protest Novel*. This essay had criticized *Native son* for the lack of any psychologically complex characters. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, won him the National Book Award in 1953 and was highly acclaimed. Civil Rights movement witnessed rise of many good female Black poets like, N.Giovvani, S.Sanchez and Gwendolin Brooks. The last one was the first female Black American to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 for her book of poetry *Anni Allen*. Many playwrights also emerged successful. One among them Amiri Baraka gained wide acceptance for his good body of work as a poet and music critic. Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King junior's, *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* is much admired.

Black literature today is a well established phenomenon, with its continuing best seller authors, poets and award winners. The Black movement in literature and arts was powered by Civil Rights movement and other power movements among the Blacks. Toni Morrison became the

first Black African American woman writer to get the Noble Prize in literature for her work. Her novel *Beloved* won her the Pulitzer in 1988. It probes the dilemma of a Black slave who found freedom but kills his daughter in apprehension of her becoming a slave. The Black memory was steeped in recollections of their ghastly past of slavery. *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* are other of her very well received novels. Alice Walker won Pulitzer and Black award for her *Colour Purple*, an epistolary novel about a girl who is seduced by her own step father, and then married off to a man equally abusive to her. Toni Morrison has won Noble Prize for her wonderful work, *Beloved*, which is also in the best selling list. Alex Haley's, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* has been widely popular. One can find a big list of Afro American writers who proved to be the best sellers. Apart from many nominations to prestigious awards, a few won many such high honors. In today's times of a media driven world, Oprah Winfrey, the world renowned TV host, through her show and Oprah's Book Club, has done a big job of promoting books written by Afro American writers. Today African-American literature has become an integral part of American literature. The progress from the time when the Black slaves had to hide their creative endeavors in order to escape persecution by the White community or having to get it certified by their White Masters for the purpose of authentication; till today where Black American literature is not just an accepted part of American literature but also a creative genre to be proud of, by the same White nation, which had compelled them to bury it.

Do Black American Women Poets and Writers Deserve A Separate Compartment?

Many critics ask why give a separate compartment to Black writers. What and which features of their writings, their thoughts and expressions make them stand out from others? How do these, especially the Black women writers fight off these forces of dominance and realize the dream of Martin Luther King Junior. Reading these Afro American voices, helps us to understand better their position and their cultural practices and their thought process. For the purpose of knowing how political, didactic or artistic their poetry is, a study of the poetry of post 1960 era and, women poets would be helpful as this was the period of huge political turmoil and social upheavals. This portrayal is found more effectively in the poetry of Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, and Rita Dove. The renowned critic Clarence Major mentions that the more recent poetry of African American women poets is a good demonstration of how all the three art, politics and didacticism can be merged together beautifully. She says these women talk with passion about their people about their spirit and the self in the context of family, class, body, spirit, moral self and focus on social issues as well, such as, drug addiction, persecution, war, sexism, rape, racism and they make poems which are solid works of art. The poetry written during this era was hugely influenced by social and political movements of the time and became powerful voices of their own. It was like cultural nationalism. These are original vibrant voices with the kind of vigor and passion which couldn't be suppressed. In a work, *Black Women Writers (1950-1980), A Critical Evaluation* (1983), edited by Mary Evans, Sonia Sanchez says that,

I had to wash my ego in the needs/aspirations of my people. (Evans: 415)

Maya Angelou in the same work is quoted as saying that,

We are a tongued folk. A race of singers. Our lips shape words and rhythms which elevate our spirits and quicken our blood....I have spent over fifty years listening to my people. (Evans: 415)

Women like Maya Angelou are not just poets; they have penned their personal histories which today have become social and political histories of their era. Toni Morrison is a shining example of bringing out the Black anguish with her superb line of works and a Noble Prize in literature. All these efforts have paved way for achieving great success for the women writers. Earlier Black literature was read mainly by the Black community but now the scenario has changed. Maya Angelou after her phenomenal success of reciting a poem at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton is now being seriously read by the White Americans as well. This was a phenomenal change for her nation of readers. Black or Afro American literature is now not just avidly read by mainstream American readers but has also become popular the world over. The patterns and styles of writing have been undergoing constant changes and the new picture that emerges is quite fascinating to watch.

MAYA ANGELOU'S CONTRIBUTION TO BLACK-AMERICAN LITERATURE:

Maya Angelou is a truly phenomenal woman, with her tremendous achievements in the field of literature. What makes her distinguished from others is the phenomenon of speaking the harshest truth in the simplest manner possible, putting the facts before her readers as it is. She speaks about things which few dare to even think about in the safe confines of their homes. Her frank expression and sincere candor along with a gift of beautiful language where each word seems musical and has a quality similar to the prose of King James Bible, make her works, worth reading. Be it her biographies, poetry, essays or other writings, her life, her personal understanding of the situations, almost everything she writes, is about her life. She is the protagonist of her own story and this has become the main attraction of her literary accomplishments.

She is playing many parts, those of a daughter, sister, mother, friend, beloved and her readers take pleasure in watching her in each of her role and also the progress of her thoughts. Her stories can be read as specimens of the genre of Bildungsroman, which chronicles the development of an individual's thought processes, the growth of his mind and his developing persona.

AFRICAN AND ARCHETYPAL ELEMENTS IN MAYA ANGELOU'S WRITINGS:

Maya Angelou, some critics say writes, in the style of the earliest Slave Narratives. The memories, harsh and painful from her ancestors have kept haunting her and have become a part of her works. Maya has spiritual leanings and believes in a supreme being, a God, who is looking after her and her loved ones. She is of the opinion that, there's a spiritual, which to her is one of the most telling in the history of the African American experience from slavery onwards and it goes, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home... a long way from home..." That's a statement which could be understood by anybody. A person who's been in slavery may compare it to their experience of being taken from their home, to another continent but anyone can relate to it. She writes about a poem by Burns, "The Slaves Lament" which talks of a lonely slave, who was home in Africa, and thrown onto the shores of Virginia. Burns, she

asserts was a man who never, even went to London. He spent most of his time in Scotland- in his village. Yet he had heard enough about the world, and the pain of slavery, and hence the poem. She admires him for this and says that he could (in his own mind) become a Black slave and write that poem.

Maya Angelou's deep anguish on her people's extreme hardships caused due to slavery is clearly discernible. The pain in her words can't be missed. She speaks strongly against oppression of any kind especially against women and the marginalized sections of the society. Slavery and the related myths are the subjects she is passionate about. Her uncanny ability to spot the injustice and mark it out is unmistakable. All this she portrays many times through legends, stories, anecdotes, cultural practices, ancient rituals of Africa. Even in her biography, *The Heart of A Woman*, in order to solve her marital problems with her then husband, Vusumzi Make and his infidelity, she has shown her friends conducting an African ritual of assembly of friends and well wishers of the couple.

For Maya Angelou, Black culture comes first and she has huge admiration for it. Readers often find her eulogizing the Black attitudes and family practices. Here in Black circles, family foundation is strong Maya claims, and elders, grandparents are taken care of and not thrown away like the 'whites' do. For her the written word is the base of culture. She asserts,

The written word is the base of culture, the spine. The other limbs and torso that attach to the spine, still depend upon the spine. She adds emphatically,

Without the written word, there can be no other form of communication.

One of the sadness's I see today is young people who have no belief or faith in tomorrow. You see people who go from When people allow themselves no vocabulary with which to explain themselves to other people, and reduce their utterances to "yeah...", "mmmhmm...", "I dig..." It's very sad.

You cannot, then, explain the delicacies of existence and the nuances of the human mind.

This is one of the reasons for which Maya needs to be cherished more for her simple yet hard hitting remarks about the lack of many of the old habits of people like reading and comprehending the issues at hand in an appropriate light. Compassion for the fellow human beings, taking the challenges of life head on and preferring the subtle nuances of being, of living life, is what she seems to cherish here in her writings. Dr. Maya Angelou is not just irresistible writer but also a must read for a person with compassion and sense of humanity in him or her.

CONCLUSION:

Talking about African-American women writers it is evident that these women faced discrimination doubly, first as a member of a Black minority community and then as a woman. Being a Black woman was certainly doubly harsh. Discussing the writings of African American women Joanne M. Braxton in *A Tradition Within A Tradition* says,

As Black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference and allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness. We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain; we have been knowers, but we have not been known. (Braxton: 130)

This is a true estimate about the women of one of the most advanced countries who have remained marginalized

and live on the periphery of society with their innermost feelings buried deep within their hearts. In such a scenario, Maya Angelou's voice has greater significance as she speaks her mind quite candidly. Maya Angelou's outstanding frank expression of a struggling Black woman, (who speaks in 'I 'meaning We, her individual voice becomes the symbol of all her people, her Black community) in her highly acclaimed creations, has become her trade mark.

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