

The Unspoken Relevance of Harlem Renaissance In American Culture.

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ABSTRACT: Harlem Renaissance is one most undervalued renaissance in American history, although its relevance is undeniable yet it is not mentioned or studied much. Maybe its importance was reduced as it was overshadowed by many important events that took place before and after it, the other reason is that it went unnoticed because no two historians agree about its inception and its end. One more reason is that it was a peaceful revolt, fought not by soldiers or armed forces nor by radicals and revolutionaries on field but was a revolt that was fought by artists, writers, poets, theorists, critics, musicians on the field of American ideology, culture, literature and mentality. The music and written or spoken words were the weapons that fought this war of identity of the African Americans, who were fighting for their second-rate citizenship in their own birthplace. The present research paper will evaluate the situations in which Harlem Renaissance took place, the effects of literature and other art forms on the American Culture and its relevance.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, African American, discrimination, literature, culture, racism, inequality.

Date of Submission: 11-01-2022

Date of Acceptance: 26-01-2022

I. INTRODUCTION

Harlem Renaissance got its name from the suburb of Manhattan named Harlem, situated in New York. Basically, it was a cultural and literary revival of the African American art forms such as music, dance, literature, folk lore, theater and politics. As Cheryl A. Walls describes that, “Renaissance itself was a combustible mix of serious, the ephemeral, the aesthetic, the political and the risqué.” (Walls 1). American Declaration of Independence, Emancipation Proclamation, End of Civil War, Abolition of Slavery, The First World War, these incidents were the precursors of the Harlem Renaissance. Most historians consider that its inception was in 1920 to 1930, some consider that it started with the Great Migration from the South to the North. But there are three important events that took place in the beginning of the twentieth century that completely changed the environment for the African Americans and how they will be identified in United States of America.

As mentioned earlier that Harlem Renaissance was chiefly an intellectual rebirth of African American culture, there were three important literary events that took place during that time. Firstly, under the influence of Alain Locke, Charles S. Johnson’s Civic Club dinner was organized by *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* on March 21, 1924, to celebrate the publication of Jessie Fauset’s novel *There is Confusion*. Johnson’s intention was to invite few white publishers, editors, literary critics and some black intellectuals and poets. But when Alain Locke insisted that this event must be opened for all the African American writers, professional and aspiring, this event turned out to be gala, with more than hundred guest. This dinner not only bridged the gap between the African American writers but gave the renaissance the jump start it needed. It acted as linchpin between three major players of the renaissance the African American literary and political intelligentsia, the white critics, publishers and patrons and the young black talent.

Secondly, the second most important event that took place was the publication of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*. The whites were always fascinated with the night life of Harlem, African Americans and their music and culture. When a white novelist exposed in his novel the spectacular Harlem life, it was met with both criticism from the blacks and unprecedented white fascination. Thirdly, many black intellectuals were publishing their journals, periodicals and magazines for the intellectual upliftment of the African Americans. But it was the advent of a literary magazine *Fire!!*, produced by a core group of young writers like Langston Hughes, Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurston under the editorship of Wallace Thurman who assumed the role of leaders of this renaissance.

There was no particular literary style, ideology or doctrine that dominated the Harlem renaissance. It was more like a quest for identity. The renaissance was a declaration of the blacks to be free more white rage, freedom from inequality, freedom from subordination, freedom from discrimination, freedom from racism. This renaissance was to prove that the blacks were not lower human beings. The black artists, writers, performers

believed in their efforts. It was not just the freedom from white stereotypes but was also freedom from the typecast expectations that the black leaders had placed on the works of the African Americans. They wanted to follow their own artistic acumen displaying their vision and diversity. There are people who still believe that Harlem renaissance is still present and is an important cultural force in America because whether it is jazz music or cabree, disco or hip-hop, Broadway or blues, in fact the carols sung during the Christmas are all parts of the black culture that give meaning and identity to the American Culture.

Harlem Renaissance and Black Identity

When the World War ended it brought high hopes for the African American community. The blacks had fought bravely and proved that they were true citizens of the American homeland. But when they triumphantly returned, mass level lynching and killings and anti-black riots took place. With these actions the whites reminded the blacks that although the slavery was abolished but equality and respect should not be expected in its place. The blacks must remember their rightful place was under the whites neither equal nor above. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was replaced with the infamous Jim Crow Laws which misused the 'Separate but Equal' doctrine to its fullest. Everything was separate for the blacks but nothing was equal to the whites. Segregation policies were followed differently in the South and the North. In South, public transportation to public education was segregated, inferior and underrated for the blacks, racism and discrimination was institutionalized. While in the North, the segregation policies were sophisticated, these included job discrimination, housing and area segregation, banking and monetary practices. The military, postal and mail services and the federal jobs were already segregated. It was difficult for the blacks to get high income or respectable jobs or any job for that matter. The blacks struggled for education, for identity, for respect, for honor.

There were three ideologies that existed during this phase and African American according to their understanding believed and followed these. The first was Booker T. Washington, he was the founder of the famous Tuskegee Institute. His vision was to uplift the generations of slaves and those brought up in slavery should integrate with the modern life. He believed that industrial education is must and the blacks should accommodate with discrimination for a short term, so that they could prove themselves and their worth through material prosperity. The second was W.E.B. Du Bois, who was the founder of Niagara Movement and formation of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was strictly against Washington's philosophy of passive acceptance. He believed that by doing so, the African Americans are silently accepting the cruelty of the Jim Crow laws, segregation and second-rate citizenship. He staunchly opposed racism, lynching, molestations, segregation policies. Du Bois recognized the wonders that artistic and literary creation could do before Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson. Du Bois insisted that, "the black man was the original American artist, that the 'rude melodies' of black slaves were the only authentic American music and that it was only black laughter, dance and song that gave meaning to an otherwise empty, materialistic American culture." (Editors 31)

The third was Marcus Garvey who was the progenitor of Black pride and Black Nationalism and his influence can be seen and ideological aspect felt in the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement. He was amongst those intellectuals who worked on releasing people from the sense of inferiority and psychological bondage. When he arrived to America, he was deeply inspired by Washington's idea but when he visited the South he encountered racism on a scale he had never experienced before. The riots of St. Louis and the reaction of white labor organizations and labor was violent anti-black purge, with was either ignored or supported by police. This led Garvey to form Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) where he gave the message of economic and cultural independence.

Harlem Renaissance and Art Forms

Many African Americans were unaware that there was any renaissance going on. For their survival they were supposed to remain servile and accept white supremacy. And even if they became aware it did not change their situation or their wages. But it was the art of these ordinary Negroes such as their dance, their music and songs, their folktales, customs, dialect which would become the motive force of cultural awakening. The writers, poets, musicians, artists all came together to bring out the true black identity. "Blues and jazz, folk idioms and urban vernacular would become the building blocks of black modernism." (Walls 5) There is no perfect moment of the beginning of the Renaissance but it gained momentum after the World War I and the year the Renaissance ended is equally disputed, some identify that it came with Great Depression, which dashed out the optimism that characterized black life in 1920s.

"You are young, gifted and black. We must begin to tell our young, there's a world waiting for you, yours is the quest that has just begun." said James Weldon Johnson. (Editors 45) Similarly, Du Bois claimed that if the black expression would be have authenticity of black culture and ethics then it would claim equality with whites. But Aaron Douglas thought opposite. He was a leading black artist, illustrator and muralist and his influence on Harlem Renaissance was visible everywhere. He made illustration in the books of writers like

Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Charles S. Johnson and James Weldon Johnson. But the black art and artists were more accepted and appreciated in Paris. But great depression forced many black artists to return to America. Other famous visual artists were Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley and Claude Johnson, the former two were modernist and entirely true to the African American subject and black experience while the later had deeper interest in African forms of art, whether it was his carvings or paintings the African themes are unmistakable. But the most famous artist was Augusta Savage recognized for bust of a Harlem child, Gamin in 1929. Later she got associated with the Civil Rights Movement but was a prominent member of the Harlem Renaissance because her work symbolized the new black identity.

Literature during this period was more understood and appreciated, and it was not limited to the traditional literary forms like poetry, prose or plays it also extends to vernaculars, journalism and theater. While some writers followed the traditional literary form but other black artist used the black vernacular speech which appealed the black public. The major or most distinguished development of literature was queer studies and introduction of homosexual themes in prose. Alain Locke published his most influential work *The New Negro* in 1925, he was a homosexual and had advocated for other young black homosexuals in New York at that time when it was universally unacceptable and intolerable taboo. After the event of Civic Club dinner which brought a new literary age in evolving America, it rapidly accelerated the literary phase of Harlem renaissance.

The New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance brought evolution in jazz music but it must be true that it offered up black talent and vitality to all popular branches of modern music. Its inception came with the staging of *Shuffle Along* in 1921 in Broadway. Artists like Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson; singers like Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle came out to international fame. It introduced the whites of New York to the black music, theater and entertainment for the first time and brought fascination for Harlem's nightlife which was vital for the renaissance. After this came the famous *The Chocolate Dandies*. Originally, jazz music was the creation of the South but got recognition in the North. Various jazz clubs started in Harlem like Alhambra Ballroom, Lenox Lounge, Apollo Theatre, Club Harlem etc. bring international stars like Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and many others.

II. CONCLUSION

The basic irony of Harlem Renaissance was that the people associated with the renaissance were dependent on the white audience, white patrons, white literary critics and white publishers. Very few blacks were capable of supporting or patronizing a black artist. Another problem was that famous black artist who were accepted by the white audience performed in such places which were far from black audiences reach, so, the renaissance was financially dependent on the white patronage. And slowly, the writers and artist due to moral dilemma of performing to please the whites resented this monetary support and detached themselves. The main idea behind Harlem Renaissance was the fight for identity and this fight later became the motive of the Civil Rights Movement in 1950s. In fact, the African Americans are still fighting for the equal rights, a recent incident of George Floyd and the Black rage that took place in many American cities is a proof that the African Americans are still under the same struggle. They want freedom from white rage and superiority complex. They want freedom from unwanted racism and gender bias at workplaces. They want equality in economically and socially. They don't want to be ghettoed or isolated and alienated from mainstream. Was the Harlem renaissance relevant? Yes and is it still relevant? Yes it is. And it would be relevant until the littlest and tiniest speck of discrimination is present on the American soil. It was the African American culture that made the American culture vibrant. And it is high time that the Americans accept this fact.

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Nida Jamali. "The Unspoken Relevance of Harlem Renaissance In American Culture.." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 11(01), 2022, pp 08-11. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722