

# **The Black Renaissance Protest against White Racism**

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## **Abstract**

*African American literature chronicles the agony, isolation, and survival of African Americans. It tells the historical story of a race's unwavering search for a true identity as well as its fight for freedom and equality. It is a literature that records the physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and psychological expression of a people going through the process of conception, growth and maturity from a racially confined state to a self-contained state. The Black Renaissance struck a chord of protest against White Racism and racist violence. Black Renaissance writing began to present a realistic view of the African American life aimed at stimulating a cultural awakening and a new militancy in the minds of the Negro populace. Significant contributions were made by writers such as Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, W.C.B. Du.Boi, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, Dorothy West, Jessi Faust and several authors. The Harlem Renaissance was followed by the Federal Writers Project in 1935, radical thinkers like Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, Robert Hayden, Frank Yerby, and Margarate Waker, gave voice to urban realism, naturalism, determinism, and social protest. This became the vogue for successive writers such as William Attaway, Chester Himes and Anne Petry. The publication of Ralf Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* paved the way for black modernist fiction. Ellison found social realism limited aesthetically as he gave importance to the novel as an art form.*

**Key words:** *Black Renaissance, Negro Identity, Humanity, etc.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

A literary estimate of the Black Renaissance is important considering its influence on Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. The post world war period gave impetus to a new literary movement in America. The movement aimed at revealing on the discrepancies and inadequacies of capitalistic democracy in post war America. Writers like Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser expressed concern over the superflousness and hollowness of the values of urban America. They questioned the superficial values of commercial civilization. American writers began to take keen interest in social and economic problems i.e. labour problems, housing, crime, social planning and disarmament. However it was the issues of the Negro that gained literary and social attention. The American conscience was awakened to the plight of the southern Negro. White dramatists like Eugene O' Neil began to experiment with Negro materials with plays like *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillum Got Wings*. It presented the Negro writer with a distinct opportunity to write about himself with greater freedom. The period saw the emergence of distinctively black literary movement which came to be regarded as the "Harlem Renaissance". The movement was nourished by two important developments.

The phenomenon known as the "Harlem Renaissance" showcased the literature and art of the New Negro movement of the 1920's epitomized in "The New Negro" (1925) an anthology edited by Alain Locke comprising of the early work of some of the most popular writers of the Harlem Renaissance including poets like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude Mckay and novelists Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer. New Negro writers questioned traditional "white" aesthetic standards. They began to develop personal self expression, racial pride and literary experimentation. Encouraged by growing response to black writing by mainstream American magazines, book publishers and white patrons, the Renaissance enjoyed critical favor and financial rewards that continued far into the great Depression of the 1930's.

The literature that the Renaissance writer produced was essentially 'protest' literature. It was an aggressive protest against social and economic injustice and the physical atrocities committed against the black race during the colonial and post colonial times. They protested against racial segregation, lynching, low wages, long work hours and inhuman conditions at work places. They demanded full social equality and rightful citizenship. They would not be disoriented by political philosophies like socialism and communism that intended to influence the black groups of the times. The Harlem black writer began to write expressing his deep seated feelings. He could make use of his own materials artistically and effectively with emotional restraint ensuring a wider audience. In Further he was well acquainted with the mainstream American literary development.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, rapidly increasing racial atrocities led to aggressive protest writing. Paul E. Hopkins editor of the *Coloured American Magazine* in the early 1900s published novels, short stories, editorials and social commentary in an attempt to revive the aura of emancipation of the antislavery era. The founding of the National Association for the advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1909 in New York City inspired black activist writers like William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Du Bois had been a strong opponent of the famous black social reformer Booker T. Washington's political policy of respecting the 'racial line'. His self-help autobiography, "Up From Slavery" (1901) became the standard manual to improved black economic standards. Washington's portrayal of his own life suggested that even the most depressed of black people could attain dignity and prosperity in the racial south by conducting themselves as valuable and productive members of society deserving fair and equal treatment before the law. Considered a classic American success story, "Up From Slavery" enhanced Washington's reputation as the most eminent African American of the new century.

However his policy was challenged by Du Bois. In contrast to Washington who propagated economic self sufficiency by respecting the "racial line", Du Bois in his collection of essays, "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903) declared that the issue of the twentieth century was the problem of the colour-line. In an essay "The Talented Tenth" Du Bois wrote, "If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men, if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools – intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it – this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life." (The Talented Tenth).

In 1912 James Weldon Johnson regarded as the fore-runner of the Harlem Renaissance published anonymously "The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man", a psychological novel which experimented with the theme of 'passing for white'. Johnson revived the African oral tradition in his "God's Trombones" (1927) which was a poetic tribute to the folk sermon traditions of southern blacks. By the time America entered World War I in 1917 Harlem was well on its way to becoming what Johnson called "the greatest Negro city in the world". New York which had always been the center of intellectual and cultural life of Black America began to draw noted leaders, activist and artists such as Du Bois and Johnson along with the countless of migrants from the South and Midwest whose talents and aspirations would fuel in the 1970's, the second wave of Renaissance in African American culture.

The first phase of the Renaissance saw major black poets like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. McKay is generally regarded as to be the first major poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His best poetry is collected in "Harlem Shadows" (1922). McKay's poems express proud defiance and bitter contempt that became the hall mark of the Harlem Renaissance. A truly revolutionary poet, Langston Hughes is regarded as the movement's most cosmopolitan and prolific writer. His writings display a freedom from the confines of race and the restrictions of literary forms. His poetry displays racial pride of race and his ability to describe the most common Negro walks of life with a nobility of expression. Hughes also used an African American street slang to express a much wider and deeper range of black expression.

He is acclaimed for his experimental jazz and blues poetry in "The Weary Blues" (1926) and "Fine Clothes to the Jew" (1927). While McKay and Hughes showed fidelity to the black American tradition and asserted their black identity, Countee Cullen of black Jamaican heritage sought success through the employment of conventional forms and Keatian lyricism. His most popular poem "Heritage" (1925) exhibits a lingering ambivalence about his racial identity, both as a person and a poet. Renaissance novelists wrote on themes based on black urban life. McKay's novel "Home to Harlem" (1928) deal with the darker side of Harlem's nightlife. Hughes's autobiography, "The Big Sea" (1940) is a candid personal account. The most significant narratives were produced by Toomer, Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen. Toomer's "Cane" a collection of sketches, poetry, fiction and drama set the yardstick for experimentalism to draw repeated attention to the question of African American identity. Fisher's "The Conjure Man Dies" which is regarded as the first African American detective novel. Thurman's novel "The Blacker the Berry" (1929) blatantly exposes colour prejudice among African Americans. It is also the first African American novel to deal with the taboo of homosexuality. Nella Larsen's works "Quicksand" (1928) and "Passing" (1929) deal with the struggles of the New Negro Woman trying to find her way in the hypothetically racially and sexually liberated North American Society of the 1920s.

The production of black non-fiction prose saw its blossoming in the encouragement of Negro literary by Negro periodicals like "The Crisis", "Opportunity", "The Modern Quarterly", "Survey Graphic" edited by Alain Locke, "The New Masses" and "The American Mercury". In addition to the contributions of Du Bois, James Welden Johnson and Schuyler's essays were published by Abram L. Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, Arthur A. Schomburg, Benjamin Brawley and J.A. Rogers. Black drama flowered in Harlem during the Renaissance. Themes and roles crossed the racial barrier dictated by whites. Black actors like Charles Gilpin won acclaim for himself and Eugene O'Neil in the creation of the title role of "Emperor Jones". Paul Green was the first ever

Negro actor to play the lead role opposite a white actress in O'Neil's "All God's Chillun Got Wings". Marc Connelly's all Negro cast production "Green Pastures" confirmed the theatrical talent and performing skills of black artists. Above all these forms it was the Negro musical that came of age. "Shuffle King" (1921) took New York by storm. The 1924 "Dixie To Broadway" introduced Florence Miller who became the most celebrated performer in the history of American entertainment. Black art made its mark in the celebrated works of Henry Ossawa Tanner whose paintings today adorn the popular art galleries of Europe and America.

The Harlem Renaissance thrived because it was nurtured on a community spirit. The fellowship of intellectual colleagues in Harlem was a force to reckon with and their inter-racial gatherings gave them a sense of belonging in relation to the larger American society. The end of the twentieth century witnessed the Harlem Renaissance spread, widening its scope, its literary and cultural aspects becoming national. The great Depression of the 1930's did in no way affect the movement. The establishment of the Federal Writers Project marks the second phase of the Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston brought out her masterpiece "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937) which won for her an abiding respect among African American novelists.

The Renaissance also brought out playwrights such as Willis Richardson. His "The Woman's Fortune" (1923) was the first non-musical play to be produced on Broadway. African American editor Charles S. Johnson brought out "Opportunity" in 1923 under the auspices of the National Urban League. Short story writer Evie Walrond published "Negro World", the voice of Marcus Garvey's universal Negro Improvement Association providing a stage and a wider audience for New Negro talent. Prominent black writers functioned as editors i.e. James Weldon Johnson "The Book of American Negro Poetry" (1922) and "The Book of American Negro Spirituals" (1925, 1926) Charles S. Johnson "Ebony and Topaz" (1927) and Countee Cullen "Caroling Dusk" (1927), etc.

Urban Realism also emerged with the Great Depression also marked the beginning of urban realism. Its chief propagandist was Richard Wright whose literary output including fiction, autobiography and social commentary occupied centre stage from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. Wright's "Uncle Tom's Children" a series of novellas based on the Jim Crow South gave voice to militant radicalism-. Wright exhibited strong Marxist leanings. In 1940 his novel "Native Son" won critical acclaim. It also marked the beginning of the black fiction of social realism. Wright's autobiography "Black Boy" (1945) emulates the slave narrative to record his intellectual and physical quest, from a racially oppressive south to anticipated freedom in Chicago. Wright was succeeded by writers like William Attaway, Chester Himes, and Ann Petry. Chester Himes "If He hollers let Him go" deals with racial conflict in a wartime industrial community, the impact of the war on Negro migrants in industrial communities and the bitterness which emerged from ensuing frustration and despair. Ann Petry's, "The Street" (1946) follows Wright's cold assessment of the power of environment in the lives of black urban dwellers. Petry created a female protagonist who breaks out of her subject to fight her racist antagonists.

The influence of the Black Renaissance found a lively community of young African American writers in Chicago in the 1930's including poets like Margaret Walker, playwright Theodore Ward, poet and journalist Frank Marshall Davis and novelist and children's book author Arna Bontemps. Chicago based magazines like the Abbots Monthly (1930-33) published the work of Wright and Himes while New Challenge (1937) co-edited by novelists Dorothy West and Wright helped the Chicago black literacy Renaissance to explain its ideals. The Negro Digest and Negro story of Chicago provided a platform for fiction writers, poets and essayists. African American drama too developed during the Depression years led by Abram Hill founder of the American Negro Theatre in Harlem, Langston Hughes's play about miscegenation "Mulatto" (1935) hit Broadway and Theodore Wards "Big White Frog" (1938) was the most widely viewed American drama of the times.

The 1930's and the 40's saw Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown keep the folk spirit alive in African American poetry. Margaret Walker succeeded with her collection of verse "For My People" (1942). Modernist experimentation is evident in Melvin B. Tolson's densely allusive "Rendezvous with America" (1942), Robert Hayclen's meditative history poems such as "Middle Passage" (1945) and "Fredrick Douglas" (1947) and Gwendolyn Brooks Pay tribute to the raw energy and rigours of black urban life in "A Street in Bronzeville" (1945) and her Pulitzer Prize Winning volume "Annie Allen" (1949). The period also saw autobiography as evident in Du Bois's "Dusk of Dawn" (1940) a self styled essay on the concept of race, Zora Neale Hurston's "Dusk Tracks on a Road" (1942) is an early experiment in auto ethnography. J.Saunders Redding's "No Day of Triumph" (1942) and Wright's "Black Boy" (1945) record the American Negro's professional, intellectual and physical quest for redemption.

The early 1950's saw African fiction moving away from Wright's brand of urban social realism. Ralph Ellison published his novel "Invisible Man" creating a new kind of black protagonist, not a victim but a hero and a way of presenting his participation in the post-depression and post World War-II, American reality. The protagonist of Ellison's novel makes the traditional migrant journey from the oppressive south to the liberal north in search of a meaningful destiny and in a series of ironic revelations discovering himself. The "Invisible Man" was the recipient of the National Book Award in 1952. In 1955 Ellison received the Prix De Rome. His

volume of essays, reviews and interviews were published under the titles “Shadow and Act” (1964) and “Going to the Territory” (1986).

## **II. CONCLUSION:**

The first fifty years of the black Renaissance with its rich and diverse themes and experimentation with literary forms culminated in concretizing the identity of the “New Negro” and affirming his right to be treated as an equal in every aspect to his white American counterpart, which is reflected in the “Invisible Man”. Hence the Harlem Renaissance with its rich and diverse theme and experimentation with a cross section of American literary forms resulted in concretizing the identity of the “Emancipated Negro” affirming his right to be treated on par with his white American counterpart; “The Invisible Man” is based on this reality.

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