

## **African American Literature- An Overview**

**Mrs. CHILKA ANITA**

*Lecturer in English, Andhra Christian College,  
Guntur, GUNTUR (Dt)-522001  
Andhra Pradesh.  
anitachilka73@gmail.com*

The African slave trade began in the 1500s, transporting workers to the Spanish Empire and Brazil, a huge Portuguese territory. Indeed, Africans have always represented a larger share of the Brazilian population than they did in North America. When the English established their North American colonies in the 1600s, people of African heritage arrived nearly as soon as whites. In 1619, the first batch of African slaves (perhaps indentured laborers) landed in Virginia. During the 1630s, the first colonial statutes were enacted, formally establishing slavery in America.

The Virginians need manpower to grow corn for sustenance and tobacco for marketing. They had recently figured out how to cultivate tobacco, and in 1617 they despatched the first cargo to England, making a good profit. Black slaves were widely accessible for trade. Using slaves then meant just keeping them in the same state in which they were purchased, without the employment of intrusive white servants. Naturally, English colonists began to play a major role in promoting the massive migration of people from Africa to America. This crossing may have been made by more people than those coming from Europe. The number who perished either in Africa during the long slave journeys or on the infamous slave ships might approach that figure. Starvation and sicknesses in the slaver ships stinking holds took a frightful toll. The Africans also fought back against their captivity, whenever and where ever they could, in bloody battles with their captors. On other occasions, captives simply flung themselves en masse into the sea to drown, turning in the water to shout derisively before disappearing from sight. Colonists intentionally imported male as well as female slaves, so that the slaves had children, whom the owners got free of charge. Between 1700 and 1750 Virginia planters acquired about 45,000 slaves, but the black population actually increased during those years from perhaps 10,000 to 100,000. In such a situation, profits could be excellent, for a burgeoning labour supply meant burgeoning sales of tobacco.

Gradually slaves were employed in a diversity of jobs, as metal workers, miners, builders and the like. However, their primary utilization continued to be in agriculture, on plantations and gang labour. By the end of 1600s possible half of the Virginia labour force consisted of slaves. Labour became more or less attached to skin colour. The black slaves brought from Africa varied widely in skin colour, appearance, stature and culture. They came from ancient societies with highly developed states; some of them so powerful that, except for tiny trading posts here and there, Europeans made no attempt to conquer the vast interior of Africa. The Africans did not leave their culture heritage behind when they were forced into slavery. The slave in Africa however, was treated more like a human being, who could marry, keep his family, and progress out of slavery. Only in America, and particularly in the English colonies, did the idea evolve of the slave as a sub-human kind of chattel, to be bought and sold like a piece of real estate.

The uncertainty regarding the black person's position as a slave however had been settled long before 1700. Enslaved men and women were clearly owned for life as were their children. Eventually, American slavery became one of the most absolute forms of enslavement known to history. Chattel slavery, where marriages were not recognized in law, where slaves had virtually no authority other than their master, existed only in the English speaking colonies. The planters of Virginia and of the other southern colonies of North America were free to treat their chattel absolutely according to their whims and fancies. Therefore, the "peculiar institution" of slavery in the English colonies thrived very much under laissez faire conditions.

There is no slavery in history, even which of the Israelites in Egypt, worse than the slavery of the African in America, Walker opined. "... show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintains, that the Egyptians heaped the insupportable insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family." However, even blacks under slavery exhibited a rare spirit of resistance. Lawrence Levine in his book, *Black culture and Black Consciousness*, gives a picture of a rich culture among enslaved blacks, a complex mixture of repudiation and adaptation, through the creativity of songs and stories. Narratives often had double meanings. The line "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan," often meant that slaves dreamt of moving from South to North, from slavery to freedom.

During the Civil War, slaves began to make up new narratives with bolder messages: “Before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be saved.” Levine describes resistance of this kind as “pre-political,” expressed in countless modes of everyday existence. Religion, magic, music, art, were all ways, according to him, for slaves to resist their dehumanization. Some born in slavery acted out the unfulfilled desire of millions. Frederick Douglass, a slave sent to Baltimore to work as a servant and as a laborer in the shipyard, somehow learned to read and write, and at twenty-one, in the year 1838, escaped from slavery, and became the most famous black man of his time, as lecturer, journalist, author. In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, he recalled his first childhood thoughts about his condition: Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? Was there ever a time when this was not so? How did the relation commence? Once, however, engaged in the inquiry, I was not very long in finding out the true solution of the matter. It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery; nor was I long in finding out another important truth, viz: what man can make, man can unmake... I distinctly remember being, even then, most strongly impressed with the idea of being a free man some day...

The Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850 by the federal government made it easy for slave owners to recapture ex-slaves or simply to pick up blacks they claimed had run away. Free blacks protested the Fugitive slave Act, denouncing President Fillmore, who signed it, and Senator Daniel Webster, who supported it. One of these was J.W. Loguen, son of a black slave and her white owner. He had escaped to freedom on his master’s horse, gone to college, and was now a minister in Syracuse, New York. He spoke to a meeting in that city in 1850:

The time has come to change the tones of submission into tones of defiance – and to tell Mr. Fillmore and Mr. Webster, if they propose to execute this measure upon us, to send on their blood-hounds... I received my freedom from Heaven, and with it came the command to defend my title to it... I don’t respect this law – I don’t fear it - I won’t obey it! It outlaws me and I outlaw it...

Loguen made his home in Syracuse a point of departure for runaway slaves leaving for Canada. His reminiscences on his own years as a slave chattel came to the attention of his former mistress, and she wrote to him, asking him either to return or pay 1000 dollars. In the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, Loguen replied, “Mrs. Sarah Logue... You say you have offers to buy me, and that you shall sell me if I do not send you \$1000; and in the same breath and almost in the same sentence, you say, ‘You know we raised you as we did our own children. Woman, did you raise your own children for the market? Did you raise them for the whipping post? Did you raise them to be driven off, bound to a coffin in chains? Shame on you! If you or any other speculator on my body and rights, wish to know how I regard my rights, they need but come here, and lay their hands on me to enslave me....

Yours, etc. J.W. Loguen

Frederick Douglass knew that the shame of slavery was not just that of the slave traders and slave owners, but of the whole nation. On the Fourth of July, 1852, he gave an Independence Day address: ‘Fellow Citizens’ Pardon me, and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice embodied in that Declaration of Independence extended to us? And am I, therefore called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits, and to express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us? What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim?

The Fugitive Slave Act, enacted in 1850 by the federal government of the United States, was part of an attempt by the federal government to repair relations between the Northern and the Southern states which had been damaged due to several reasons. The Act make it easy for slave-owners to re-capture ex-slaves or simply pick up blacks they claimed had run away. In 1854, however, the slavery problem suddenly re-opened. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of that year and the turmoil that followed in Kansas disrupted and divided the nation.

In January 1854 Douglass moved to secure two objectives: get national support for a central railroad route across the continent, and open the region beyond the Missouri for settlement. In particular, the bill would create two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, one implicitly for slavery and the other implicitly against slavery; deny Congress any role in deciding the status of slavery in these territories; and in any case facilitate the passage of slave-holders with their slave through these territories. The Northern states exploded in rage at what they

regarded as a Southern conspiracy. The South was accused of attempting to spread its hegemony over Northerners. Debate over the bill raged in Congress for four months. But the southerners carried the day with the help of their sympathizers from the North. Despite all protests, the Senate enacted the Kansas-Nebraska bill on March 3, 1854, after an all-night debate, by a vote of thirty-seven to fourteen. Two and a half months later the House of Representatives did the same, by the bare margin of three votes.

The people of Missouri were determined to make the newly created Territory of Kansas, contiguous to its own borders, into a slave state. Otherwise they would be hemmed in on three sides by Free states. Slaves would constantly run away, especially in western Missouri, where freedom would be just across the Missouri River. With the issue of slavery in Kansas about to be decided by popular sovereignty, Southerners grew rather desperate. The issue, in their minds, was simply too crucial. They gave up on the democratic system and turned to instigation and intimidation on a mass scale to get what they wanted. When the first territorial election in Kansas approached in the fall of 1854 – the choosing of a territorial delegate to Congress, Senator David Atchison, one of Stephen A. Douglass close friends, campaigned up and down the Missouri frontier, urging Missourians to cross over into Kansas and cast ballots. In the words of a later congressional investigation, a “systematic invasion” then occurred. More than half the 2800 ballots cast in the election were fraudulent, and a pro-slavery delegate was elected.

The South lived by a code of honor, which demanded that honorable men were not meddled with. Over two centuries of Southern life, honor and slavery had become so intertwined that many simply could not conceive one could exist without the other. Out of honor came an imperious insistence upon absolute authority over others, in this case over black people. As historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has written: “White man’s honor and black man’s slavery became in the public mind of the South practically indistinguishable.” Out of this proud prickliness could come the quick flares of violent anger so widely noted as a trait among Southern white men, for a readiness to die in defense of honor was the highest virtue.

Thousands of Southerners, both male and female, saw the problem they faced vis-à-vis the Northerners and the war that followed as a simple test of their honor. They must either assert themselves against the Yankee or secede from the Union. “My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union,” the President asserted to Horace Greeley, the influential abolitionist editor of the New York Tribune, in August 1862. It is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do this”.

Slavery, then, was in many respects, the dominant issue of debate in the North-South confrontation. Lincoln, who hated slavery and yet refused to concede the equality of blacks with whites, represented the central paradox in the Northern attitude to slavery. What the North wanted was to put slavery back to where the North believed the fathers of the nation had put slavery: legally protected, but kept where it was, marked out clearly as a peculiar institution to be detested by everyone, and thus placed in the course of ultimate extinction. If confined to the Southern states, slavery would eventually die, perhaps in a hundred years, and the North was willing to put up with it that long. If the Northern attitude to slavery was articulated best by Abraham Lincoln, a Southerner, it was Stephen Douglass, a Northern senator, who most perfectly expressed the Southern view of slavery. Douglass openly proclaimed that black people were inherently inferior to whites. White people had a right to enslave blacks, and state and federal authorities had no right to meddle with this right. Douglass opinions summed up, more or less, what the South felt about slavery.

Slavery indeed emerged as the focal issue of North-South confrontation in the senatorial election of 1858 in which Douglass, the Democratic candidate faced Lincoln, the Republican candidate. In a series of debates during the run-up to this election, Lincoln and Douglass argued out the case against and for slavery respectively, either seeking to interpret the letters of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution in his own spirit to present his position on the matter. On November 6, 1860, Abraham Lincoln fulfilled his promise by getting elected as President of the United States in a four-cornered contest. But no sooner was the election result announced that several southern states formed themselves into a confederacy and declared their intention to secede from the Union leading to the Civil War between the Union and Confederacy. The war came to an end at Gettysburg with the defeat of the Confederacy. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1863 set the Negroes in America free.

However the White American Society would continue status quo of White colonialistic attitude towards the Negroes by introducing segregation and Black codes and Jim Crow laws to implement it. Segregation was a subtle form of slavery. It deprived the black man of his real identity that of full-fledged American citizen. It alienated him from mainstream America making him an outcaste, an alien in his own land. The emancipated

Negro was then subjected to racial atrocities orchestrated by white racists like the Klu- Klu Klan. Any Negro who inadvertently transgressed the race line was lynched or shot.

It was only a hundred years later that an organized black protest against segregation began under the able leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a black preacher and a Civil Rights Activist. What began as a local boycott of public transport bus lines in Montgomery catapulted into a nationwide movement for desegregation and freedom for the black American peoples in its truest sense. Freedom marches organized by the black leaders were violently attacked by white administrations. Homes of black Civil Rights leaders including that of Martin Luther King were bombed. Racist ferocity took a great toll on human lives even those of innocent black children. However, 'sit-ins' began to show results and one by one institutions began to be desegregated especially with the active concern of John F. Kennedy the President. Some of the memorable and greatest of American speeches were delivered during this period particularly Martin Luther King's speech "I Have a Dream" which he gave to a million people at the Lincoln Memorial Washington DC, 1963 during the centenary celebrations of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Not long after King was assassinated. The freedom of the Black men in America was thus brought at great cost but ultimately triumphed as King's closing exclamation in his speech "I have a Dream" testifies "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last"!

#### REFERENCES:

- [1]. **Bell, Bernard W. (1987):** "The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition". Amherst.....: University of Massachusetts Press.
- [2]. **Carolyn W. Sylvander (1975):** "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Female Stereotypes," Negro American Literature Forum 9.
- [3]. **Charles Johnson, (1988):** "Being Black Writing since 1970". Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indiana Polis.
- [4]. **Dickstein, Morris. (1971):** "The Black Aesthetic in White America." *Partisan Review*, 38.
- [5]. **Grice, Helena. (2001):** "Beginning Ethnic American Literatures", U.K.: Manchester University Press.
- [6]. **John Hope Franklin, (1967):** "From slavery to Freedom", A History of Negro American, Third Edn., Amerind – Publishing Co. Pvt.Ltd., New Delhi.
- [7]. **Kent, George E. (1972):** "Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture" Chicago: Third World Press.
- [8]. **Marcus, Steven.** "The American Negro in Search of Identity." *Commentary*, 16.
- [9]. **Walton Litz., (1981):** "Ralph Ellison." In *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies (Supplement 2, part 1, W.H. Auden to O. Henry)*, edited by A. Walton Litz., New York: Scribner's.