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Africa's Portrayal in African-American Writing

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Abstract

The depiction of Africa in African-American literature constitutes a nuanced and dynamic exploration, unveiling the intricate rapport between African-American writers and the African continent. Over centuries, Africa's portrayal has assumed myriad forms, serving as a symbolic homeland, a locus of struggle, and a wellspring of cultural inspiration. Imbued within these representations is a profound quest for identity and a yearning for belonging. Prestigious African-American authors, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Maya Angelou, adeptly interlace African culture, folklore, and history into the tapestry of their works. In so doing, they delve into themes of heritage, resilience, and cultural pride, presenting Africa not merely as a nostalgic ideal but as a vibrant tapestry of traditions intricately shaping the African-American experience. This representation transcends sentimentality, offering a palpable connection to ancestral roots and cultural heritage. Yet, the portrayal of Africa in African-American literature transcends idyllic visions of a distant homeland. Renowned authors such as Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie confront the harsh realities of colonization, slavery, and oppression in their narratives. In their hands, Africa becomes a complex terrain of struggle and resistance, where characters grapple with the enduring legacies of colonialism and the intricate dynamics of post-colonial identity. The representation of Africa in African-American literature reflects broader historical and political dynamics. During the Harlem Renaissance, there was a surge of interest in Pan-Africanism, as African-American writers actively sought connections with counterparts on the continent in the fight against racism and imperialism. This period witnessed an embrace of African art, literature, and culture, as writers sought to reclaim and celebrate their African heritage.

Key words: Black Aesthetics, Harlem Renaissance, Identity, Diaspora, Myth

Introduction

African traditions and rituals, resilient against antagonistic forces, embarked on a transformative journey from their ancestral lands to diverse corners of the globe. The intriguing evolution of their manifestation in various artistic forms beckons further exploration. The endurance of these traditions and rituals among the African diaspora, scattered across continents, maintains an unbroken

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link with Africa. These ancient practices, enshrined in both oral traditions and written records, find abundant expression within the tapestry of African-American literature. The infusion of African tradition into African-American literature unveils a rich tapestry of aesthetic traits, wherein writers intricately explore their African roots and illuminate their significance for both the black community and the global audience. These traditions weave through the fabric of poetry and prose, offering a profound exploration of cultural identity and resilience.

During the harrowing era of slavery, Africa was mourned and idealized as a lost homeland within African-American literature, a poignant image etched deeply in collective memory. However, the twentieth century witnessed a renaissance of African influence, fueled by the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, and the Black Arts Movement. This resurgence marked a profound shift, transforming Africa from a distant memory to a vibrant force in African-American literature. The African tradition in African-American literature, once a nostalgic remembrance, emerged as a captivating narrative, fostering a cultural reunion among black communities worldwide. The exploration of these traditions reflects not only a reclamation of heritage but also a celebration of resilience, tenacity, and the enduring spirit that transcends geographical boundaries. As African-American writers delve into their African roots, the literature becomes a testament to the enduring legacy of traditions, offering a poignant narrative that resonates with both historical struggles and the triumph of cultural reconnection.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis of African-American literary works spanning different genres and historical periods. Textual analysis will examine themes, character portrayals, and narrative perspectives to elucidate how African writers depict Africa, exploring identity, culture, and socio-political contexts within the African-American literary tradition.

Review of Literature

Many critics such as Robert A. Bone's The Negro Novel in America (1965), Addison Gayle's edition of Black Aesthetic (1972) and The Way of the New World (1975) have studied the projection of Africa in Africa-American Literature. They advanced the notion of African-American ethos, inexorably linked with African culture. Amiri Baraka's Home (1975) offered a new consciousness to analyze African-American literature. Other remarkable works that highlight African culture in African-American literature are Houston A. Baker's The Journey Back (1980) and Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (1984); Robert Stepto's From Behind the Veil (1979) and Afro-American Literature: The

Reconstruction of Instruction (1979); and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s The Signifying Monkey (1988) and Figures in the Black (1987).

Henry Gates' views on black literature basically focus on two major premises. First, he argues that the theory of reading black texts is inherent in the "vernacular tradition," traceable to Eshu in African mythology. Eshu, an African god, is a messenger of the Supreme Being, a trickster and an intermediary between humanity and destiny; he is "benevolent as well as malevolent, ambiguous and mischievous" (Herskovits 253). The concept of Eshu, the Signifying Monkey, is one of key cultural concepts that African-American brought to the New World in American vernacular tradition. Gates states: "Within New World African-informed cultures, the presence of this topos, repeated with variations as circumstances apparently dictated, attests to shared belief systems maintained for well over three centuries, remarkably, by sustained vernacular traditions. We can trace this particular topos ultimately to the Fon and Yoruba cultures of Benin and Nigeria" (Signifying Monkey 4). The signifying monkey "contains a primal scene of instruction for the act of interpretation" (4). Thus, the critique of African-American literature requires an exploration into the topos' relationship with African cultural heritage. Gates further stresses his notion that the black Africans who survived the dreaded "Middle Passage" from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone.

Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music (mnemonic device for Bantu and Kwa tonal languages), their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance. Gates asserts, "If the Dixie Pike, as Jean Toomer put the matter in Cane, has grown from a goat path in Africa, then Black vernacular tradition stands as its signpost, at that liminal crossroads of culture contact and ensuing difference at which Africa meets Afro-America" (Signifying Monkey 4). Gates' second premise asserts that African-American writers involve one another in acts of revising, where signifying can mean repetition. Thus, the ensuing generations of writers revise their predecessors, adding, modifying, and borrowing motifs to create pastiche. He explains, "Ours is repetition, but repetition with a difference, a signifying black difference" (Black Literature and Literary Theory 3). "Gates' premises are similar to the theoretical basis of literary indebtedness that is so central to comparative literature studies" (Shaw 97).

Analysis and Interpretation

African-American folktales have a lot in common with stories from Africa. Early African American storytellers adapted African trickster tales, where, small

animals cleverly outsmarted larger ones. They adjusted these stories to fit the New World, using animals like tortoises and hares to represent the underdog. Brer Rabbit was born from these adaptations. Instead of African predators like lions and elephants, the new tales featured bears, lions, and foxes. In 1880, Joel Chandler Harris compiled these stories in "Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings." The animal trickster theme evolved into characters like Tar Baby, a clever person who outwitted slave masters.

African traditions also influence a literary category in African-American literature known as "slave narratives" or "the mainstay of Afro-American literary discourse" (Baker 31). Notable examples of these narratives include Frederick Douglass' "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" (1845), Moses Roper's "A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery" (1837), and Olaudah Equiano's "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African" (1789). Equiano, taken from eastern Nigeria to the West Indies and later enslaved in Virginia, shares his memories of native culture and experiences of slavery, expressing:

> I hope the reader will not think I have trespassed on his patience in introducing myself to him, with some account of the manners and customs of my country. They had been implanted in me with great care, and made an impression on my mind, which time could not erase, and which all the adversity and variety of fortune I have since experienced, served only to rivet and record: for, whether the love of one's country be real or imaginary, or a lesson of reason, or an instinct of nature, I still look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure has been for the most part mingled with sorrow." (Barksdale and Kinnamon 14-15)

Equiano's insights foreshadow themes that emerged in later African-American literature. Writers after the 18th century connect with Equiano's recognition that he finds joy in remembering the early scenes of his life, even though that joy is often mixed with sorrow. This sentiment echoes in the works of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon," and Alex Haley's "Roots," reflecting what Africa symbolizes for the soul of the African-American writer. During the eighteenth century, Africa lingered in the minds of recently enslaved individuals, inspiring stories and songs with motifs from African folktales, including motion imagery, supernatural beings, and the spirit's abode, the trickster, the sacredness of motherhood, game-playing, and verbal competition.

The Spirituals, rich in intricate connections to Africa, played a significant role in shaping African-American poetry. Critics highlight their musical roots in the vast

song tradition originating from African influences and flourishing on American soil (Long and Collier 108). Notable Spirituals like "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "Crucifixion" possess distinctive elements setting them apart from European poetic forms, as some critics mistakenly compare them without recognizing African musical nuances and linguistic devices. The enduring appeal of these Spirituals lies in their immediate and universal resonance, their timeless beauty, and their inherent humanity (Long and Collier 313). W. E. B. Du Bois made a noteworthy contribution to the understanding of spirituals. In his 1903 work, "The Souls of Black Folk," he proudly acknowledged the impact of spirituals on his intellectual pursuits: "And so before each thought that I have written in this book, I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child, these songs have stirred me strangely" (Du Bois 181). The profound influence of Spirituals is evident in Du Bois's book, where each chapter is preceded by "a bar of the Sorrow Songs." Du Bois astutely observed that spirituals employ rhetorical devices requiring careful analysis. One such device is double-talk, a method of intentional disguise, allowing slaves to conceal the true meaning of their verbal expressions. For instance, in Old Testament songs, symbolic representations include Egypt as the South, Pharaoh as the slave owner, the Israelites as the slaves, and crossing the Red Sea as an allegory for escaping slavery. Double-talk serves as a narrative strategy, frequently accompanying oral compositions, employing symbolic words that resonate with the audience's experiences and referencing universal events of cosmic significance.

As the 1920s unfolded, African-American writers embarked on creating fresh works, blending inherited artistic expressions cultivated over the past three centuries. This artistic synthesis reached its pinnacle in what we now know as the Harlem Renaissance. During the 1920s, these writers, while celebrating folk traditions and engaging in high art, found inspiration in Africa. The migration of numerous Black individuals from the South to New York City during this period contributed to a cultural renaissance now etched in American history as the Harlem Renaissance. Writer after writer revitalized the depth of African cultural traditions through African-American folk songs, narratives, themes, styles, motifs, and ethics. Alain Locke (1886-1954), a cultural critic of that era, emphasized the importance of embracing the entirety of Africa. He expressed, "If the Negro is interested in Africa, he should be interested in the whole of Africa; if he is to link himself up again with his past and his kin, he must link himself up with all of the African peoples" (Long 305). Many writers adhered to Locke's suggestion, and James Weldon Johnson, a prominent poet of the time, penned a powerful poem titled "O Black and Unknown Bards":

"O black and unknown bards of long ago,

How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?

How, in your darkness, did you come to know

The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?

Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?

Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,

Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise

Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?" (Barksdale 486)

This poem reflects a profound invocation to ancestral Africa, capturing the essence of how these unknown bards, despite their historical challenges, discovered the transformative magic of the minstrel's lyre. The Harlem Renaissance stands as a testament to their enduring influence and the revival of African cultural richness by writers committed to embracing their roots. James Weldon concluded his apostrophized poem with the words, "You sang far better than you knew; the songs/ That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed." This sentiment resonated with other poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes, in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," expressed, "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep// I look upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it." Additionally, Claude McKay, filled with intense nostalgia, romanticized Africa in "The Tropics in New York":

"My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;

A wave of longing through my body swept,

And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,

I turned aside and bowed my head and wept." (Barksdale 493)

McKay further explored his vision of the world based on African ethical standards through his novels, "Banjo" and "Banana Bottom," set in France and Jamaica, respectively. The themes presented in his poetry collection, "Harlem Shadows" (1922), are equally noteworthy, reflecting the enduring influence of African heritage on his artistic expression during the Harlem Renaissance. The contributors to the Harlem Renaissance not only proclaimed the arrival of the New Negro but also deeply immersed themselves in their African heritage. In "The New Negro," edited by Alain Locke, essays heralded the movement's ideology, emphasizing black contributions to global culture and their preparedness for leadership, not only in the arts but also in various human endeavors. Locke asserted, "We must realize

that in some respects we need what Africa has to give us" (Long and Collier 305). The movement exuded confidence and determination to reshape race relations, fostering an awakened consciousness emanating from Harlem. Prominent African-American writers, including Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, and Sterling A. Brown, considered Africa a crucial reference point for an accurate analysis of black history in America.

From the 1960s onwards, African-American writers continued to incorporate African cultural traditions in diverse ways. The works of Robert Hayden, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Lorraine Hansberry, Nikki Giovanni, and Margaret Walker further enriched African traditions. During the 1950s and 1960s, Africa held a significant place in the minds of African-American writers, akin to what Greece and Rome symbolized for white Europeans and Americans. Global events, such as World War II, played a role in shaping African-American literature. The war brought Africans and African-Americans closer, prompting a realization of the injustice faced in colonial Africa and the segregated United States. Black students and expatriates in European capitals, particularly France, found solidarity, as expressed in the poems of Sedar Senghor, Aime Cessaire, and Leone Damas, forming the basis of the negritude ideology by Jean-Paul Sartre. In an era of idealistic universalism, racism was perceived as a threat to the wellbeing of the universal human family. The 1960s witnessed a mingling of artistic creation in the black community with popular culture, embracing the notion of "Black is beautiful." The poetry and essays of Le Roi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, reflected this blending. Lorraine Hansberry's optimism for integration stemmed from the belief that African Americans should draw courage from their African ancestors, fostering cooperation with Africans in their struggle for independence and economic justice.

During the 1970s and 1980s, African-American literature often found inspiration in African themes, even when discussing immediate experiences within the United States community. Writers delved into their African roots to seek answers and illuminate their experiences. Notable works from this period include Paul Marshall's "Brown Girl, Brownstones," Ishmael Reed's "Mumbo Jumbo" (1978), and John A. Williams' "The Man Who Cried I Am." Furthermore, many feminist novels during this era chose to incorporate Africa into parts of their narratives. In this context, Barbara Christian emphasizes the significant contributions of Afro-American women writers during the seventies and eighties, noting that their commitment to exploring the self as central, rather than marginal, is a testament to their insights accumulated over a century of literary activity. Afro-American women writers were no longer on the literary periphery; many emerged as its finest practitioners.

The exploration of self leads the black feminist writer to Africa. Consequently, several novels from this period are set in Africa or imply that the new moral strength derives from the ancient wisdom of Africa. Examples include Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon" (1978) and "Tar Baby" (1980); Gloria Naylor's "The Women of Brewster Street" (1980); Toni Cade Bambara's "The Salt Eaters" (1980); Alice Walker's "You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down" (1981) and "The Color Purple" (1982); Joyce Carol Thomas' "Marked by Fire" (1982); Ntozake Shange's "Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo" (1982); Audre Lorde's "Zami" (1982); and Paule Marshall's "Praisesong for the Widow" (1983). The identity crisis is a recurring theme in these novels, whether facing a male-dominated society or challenging societal moral systems. "In fact, in many of these novels, Africa and African women become important motifs for trying out different standards of new womanhood" (Christian 181). Africa is no longer distant but embraced intimately, with protagonists having lived in or traveled to Africa, no longer seeing it as a lost home in the contemporary African-American consciousness.

Conclusion

The trajectory of African-American literature is a captivating journey, intricately woven with the threads of African themes, resilience, and a relentless quest for identity. From the early narrative fabric that reconstructed African folktales, setting the stage for a distinctive literary tradition, to the cultural renaissance embodied by the Harlem Renaissance, this literary odyssey unfolds as a testament to the enduring connection between Africa and African-American writers. The Harlem Renaissance, a pivotal chapter in this narrative, witnessed a celebration of folk ways that resonated with the vibrancy of African cultural traditions. It became a beacon illuminating the path for subsequent generations of writers who sought to navigate the complexities of their identity. This period marked not only a literary awakening but also a profound cultural reconnection with Africa. The subsequent decades, particularly the 1970s and 1980s, witnessed a renewed embrace of African themes within African-American literature. This era became a crucible for self-exploration, feminism, and the pursuit of moral strength. In this exploration, Africa emerged as a powerful source, a wellspring of ancient wisdom and cultural heritage. Writers, grappling with questions of identity and purpose, found solace and inspiration in the roots of their African ancestry.

As African-American literature continued to evolve, the dynamic relationship between African and African-American literary traditions became increasingly pronounced. The exploration of African themes was no longer a nostalgic remembrance but a vibrant and integral part of contemporary narratives. The literary landscape became a canvas where historical gaps were bridged, and the echoes of Africa reverberated in the voices of writers, shaping the very essence of

their storytelling. The profound connection between African and African-American literature is a saga of evolution, resilience, and cultural rediscovery. It is a narrative that celebrates the intricate tapestry of shared heritage, acknowledging the past while influencing the present and paving the way for a future where the resonance of African themes continues to echo in the corridors of literary expression.

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