

#for M.A. semester 4, American Literature
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Black Women's Fiction ***(A Brief History)***

Blacks in America are known by several names such as Negro, Coloured, Pan African, Afro-American, Black, Black-American etc. The word African comes from Afri, Afriqui or Afrigi. It was used to denote a small Tunisian group. Later on its meaning was extended to a large population living from Morocco to Libya. The colonists used the term for administrative purposes.

The blacks reached America in the 17th century in large number but they were denied their links with their roots and their culture. They were enslaved.

The history of black fiction, particularly fictions written by black man has its roots in the 19th century. In the 20th century the black writers initiated Harlem Renaissance, which is a landmark in the development in black fiction. A lot of writers contributed to the genre of novel as well as to the other genres of literature.

So far black women fiction is concerned, black women were not far behind. In the later part of the 18th century and early period of the 19th century some literary writings appeared but the first novel written by a black woman is Francis Harper's *Iola Le Roy* published in 1892. The novels written by Anglo American writers presented the negative images of the blacks whereas the blacks were writing about tragic mulatta which means a hybrid i.e. children of white and black parentage.

From the 1940s black women started writing against the negative images of the black women. Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and West's *The Living is Easy* portrayed the heroines who were frustrated and destructive. They also alienated from themselves. *Maud Martha* (1953) by Gwendolyn Brooks brought a shift in the black women's fictions. It focuses on the process of self definition. It influenced Paul Marshall's *Browngirl, Brownstones* (1959). This book is also a landmark in black women's fiction. It is a story of a black mother and daughter.

When the black women shifted to the north, they were engaged as cotton pickers, cooks, prostitutes and government-factory workers. The works of Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston deal with the problems faced by the black women. They discussed the

black community and their culture in great detail. They also made the people aware of the importance of community in developing one's identity. They also made several writers aware of the links of animosity and patriarchal attitudes between black men and women with capitalism and racism. This perspective changed the blacks' attitudes to their own community. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* hold the communities responsible for the tragedies, especially the tragedies of women. They also hold the view that the black community itself has put a threat to the survival of the black women and has made their life miserable. They protested against the sexist and the racist attitudes of the society. Simply to put the blame on the whites will not bring any positive result but the blacks also need to change their attitudes towards black women.

Black women novelists gained importance in the last phase of the twentieth century and are prominent in the 21st century. Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Tony Cade Bombara, Joyce Carol Thomas, Alice Walker and a lot of other novelists have contributed a lot to the black women fiction. How sexism and racism have made their lives pitiable is vividly portrayed in their novels.

One of the major themes they discuss is *the search for identity*. The metaphorical word 'journey' stands for different types of experiences one has in life. Sometimes the journey is from silent object to speaking object and sometimes from one place of problems to the other.

The white masters as well as their patriarchal system had given them an identity- the identity of being powerless, speechless, helpless, entrapped, etc. They had to fight the identities imposed on them.

How the black women strive to gain respect and dignity and throw the yoke of slavery is reflected in the novels of the black women novelists. Lesbianism is also a dominant theme in their novels.