Harlem Renaissance: 
A Revolt against Racism in Africa-American Fiction

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Abstract: Racism is a stigma in the name of religion. The American society has been gripped with such social problems for centuries though it claims to be the super power of the world. Such social evil has been fictionalized in the writings of the Africa-American writers who face such atrocities throughout their life.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Africa-American Fiction

Harlem Renaissance (1920-30) is a very short period in American literary history but its quality of literary production revolting against racism brought about a radical change in the American society. The African American women novelists harness their pen delineating the tragedy of the black women who suffer silently in the hands of their white men’s counterparts. Such suffering and its descriptions are so lively and accurate that the American society sensed an immediate revolt by the Africa-American people and their supporters. So Harlem Renaissance again proves that pen is mightier than sword which the European society experienced from the pen of Rousseau and Voltaire in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Life for black women, in Harlem, a suburb of New York, US, was very much precarious which was “the tale told by an idiot”. Racism, sexual harassment, poverty and economically dependency on the whites made life most miserable and brutish. When their predecessors were destined to suffer in the hands of their white neighbors and bosses, the young educated successors revoluted against such long prevailing racism that had been treating the black American as second class citizens in America. Denial of equal socio-political statue in every sphere of life made them rebel against the social system. The protest of fire kept on burning ceaselessly due to the sexual harassment on the black women and it was aggravated by the inaction of the government. The protest through pen by the black women could not black out such heinous social evils of racism that had been enjoying political and corporate patronage for a long time. The writings flowed from such protest against the black women took its name as Harlem Renaissance that heralded a new trend in literature.

As the literary trend took its birth from the protest against the racism and sexual harassment, it exclusively dealt with the oppression of the black women in the hands of white men. The writings of this period analyzed the plights of the Afro-American in US in the form of autobiographical novels what the novelists, who were mostly women, experienced in their lives. Social and family life of the black women went to hell tying nuptial naught with the white men who were only interested in sex and the wealth their black wives. The warmth of husbandly love in white men was nil that wounded the black wives deeply. Love is the epicenter of marriage for the Africa-American but marriage is just a biological and financial requirement for the white people. Such socio-cultural differences between the white and black people made life more complex when a black woman marries a white man out of love. Marriage has different meanings in the same place for whites and blacks which brought about a new chemistry when both black and white are united in marital tie.

Racism and its impact in US could be easily imagined from the following facts. Racism was so deeply rooted in the American society that the Blacks were denied of equal socio-cultural status with whites even guaranteed by the constitution. The example could be cited that after three centuries of attending independent; U. S.A has its first black president Barack Obama who struggled hard to get rid of the stigma of racism affix to him by his political opponents who promised to fight it out not only by law but also by the upliftment of the American black man who still struggles for their entitled status.

Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement, set in protesting the white’s brutal assaults on the blacks, especially women and also describes how the white people look down upon the black in the public areas. It is a matter of shock that often the white people assault the black without any reasons. Most of the white people in America hate the black people only for their color. Black people are not eye-appealing to the whites who price every thing on the basis of matter that glitter even though it.
The self-declared civilized society of the West was divided into two groups on the basis of racism as India into four on the basis of castes. When the division of society on the basis of caste is not devoid of humanism, the racial division witnesses such things in the west and America. The hatred against black people generates hatred which brings about divisions in society and becomes the reason of bloodshed, civil war, laws and order problems. Though racism and its related problems have been rapidly declining in the West and in US due several factors, often violence erupts regarding it bringing death and devastation. In the racial gripped society the women suffer a lot both mentally and physically by the white as they are attracted by the appearance without going through the core of the white people’s social system of marriage and love.

Black women are cut-off from the mainstream of society and as they are denied of equal socio-economic status, even achieving the same rank in the same office. The white people abused their socio-economic power to sexually exploit the Black women who could not protest though they wanted to do so is a cudgel on the black woman as if she is born and brought to relieve the passion of her white neighbor. The democratic set up of the western civilization kept the black people suppressed; even the later constitutionally empowered to enjoy an equal status. The underestimation to the black from the racial point of view is simply superstitious for the self declared civilized western people. Their scientific thought, racial outlook and reasonable dealings fail to be judicious considering the case of black people whom they think as the object of their entertainment.

The black people harbor a feeling of inferiority for their color and remain mentally separated from the white living under one roof in one apartment. White people sometimes knowingly or unknowingly, tie knot with black people, but later the genetical and cultural differentiation ragged the marital relationship ending in a bitter separation.

The industrial booming in U.S. attracted the Africans to migrate to Harlem for employment and get manual unskilled work. Harlem harbored black people for its own development; side by side the Harlem inhabitant not only deployed the black in their own house-hold work but also used the black women as their time-passing bed partners. The genius black women rebelled against such an inhuman oppression meted out to them. Their writings created awareness among Americans to feel their problems and wanted elimination. The

movement of Southern blacks to Northern cities, the emergence of radical thought and the publication of black magazines set the stage for the Harlem Renaissance, the time when black writers produced some of the most profound literary works.

Harlem Renaissance, a literary trend, is a product of the revolt of the African American against the system of racism. 1920s to 1930s is the era of Harlem Renaissance that has brought about volume of literary product on racism and sexual harassment to the black women meted out by their white and it paved the way to fight for women’s equal access to education and status. The writers like Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston harnessed their pens to compose novels and articles that dealt with the untold heart-rending sufferings & miseries in the hands of white men.

Fauset and Hurston have portrayed their personal painful sufferings through different fictional characters such as Jennie and Jonna & others. Jonna’s life in Harlem began from poverty and it took a U- Turn after her progressed financially. She suffered a lot dreaming for an ideal conjugal life and trying her best to translate the dream into reality. Ideal husband in US was possible only in dream and not in reality which Jona could discover later which was a rare thing in the American society through a lot of pains only running after an ideal life that should be supported by love and sacrifices. Jonna inherited such ideology from the root of ancestral, parentage of Africa. She wanted to have an ideal family life in a barren land of love where matter and income is the yardstick to measure the personality and talent. People try to reach in the socially destined goals even throwing the institutionalised means to dust.

Marriage is a term in our patriarchal society that it compels the woman to compromise with life in oppressive circumstances. Through the character of Janie, Hurston reflects her own life in the novel, ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’. Every line that reflects the suffering of Janie is the personal feeling and experience of Hurston. The independent life which Janie wanted was not possible in the American soil. Janie’s journey begins at the age of sixteen, when her dying grandmother marries her off to Logan Killicks, an older man with sixty acres, and a mule. Rebellng against Logan’s attempt to turn her into a work-horse, Janie runs off with Joe Starks-a fellow with big dreams and a big voice. There also she becomes “a rut in the road”. But after Joe’s death, the forty years old Janie falls in love with Tea Cake, a free spirited laborer much younger than herself. “Janie saw her life like a Great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone, dawn and doom were in the branches” (56). She seeks her identity in the eyes and arms of men. Hurston, on the other hand, sought her identity in her own self, in her work, in speaking- and writing- her own mind.
The marital life is not conflicts between Janie and her husbands but it is an ideological war of black and white. Here Janie’s role is challenged as her courage led her to break one marriage after another. And finally, the way she left her husbands that shows Hurston’s emergent female hero.

Racism on family life and its impact on conjugal relationship still leave its print even in the 21st century, the black middle class quest for social equality. Like Jennie, many of them were able to escape society’s norms to make lives better for themselves. But still, White men’s brutality on treating Black Women as their temptation-releasing instruments become a chapter in the social political history of mankind.

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