

# The Harlem Renaissance And Contemporary African American Women's Writing

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the creativity and intellectual life of African Americans flourished in the Midwest and northern regions of the United States, specifically in Harlem. It is a neighbourhood city of New York that teemed with black writers, artists, musicians, and intellectuals. The most important artistic figures literary migrated to the negro capital of the world to define their identity and racial pride after a long era of discrimination. Harlem Renaissance's origin lies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century great migration when a huge number of African Americans migrated from the South to the most populated areas to seek relatively more economic opportunities. According to the scholars, it was a spiritual coming of age for black artists and intellectuals who held their chances for self-determination and group expression. After the World War, in 1920, black artists produced a higher amount of work that was influenced by African aesthetic traditions. Meta Warrick Fuller was the first black woman who received a federal commission for her art. Her good works included the Ethiopia Awakening (1914), which was the resurgence of African themes in Harlem Renaissance art. There were many great writers and artists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there were many black women writers who got a chance to add their contributions to African American literature. In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was racial discrimination and violence, which inspired the literature of protest containing novels, short stories, and poetry.

Here, we will discuss the contemporary black writers in the Harlem Renaissance. We will discuss the gender, class, and ethnicity related to self-actualization in the literature of these black writers.

The main themes of African American women writers were race, gender, colour, relationships, identity, spirituality, roles of women and their representations revivifying hidden history, and sexism.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman regarding a woman who was a descent into madness. In her story, she warns her readers about the consequences of the role of gender in a man-dominant society. She had raised points about the man's dominance in society and the woman being a dutiful wife who has no right to question her husband's authority. Men in society are considered rational thinkers and decision-makers. Charlotte had described gender issue in this story, she added that man and woman have different psyche. There is a woman in this story who is suffering from mental disease, her husband takes her to the doctor, why the doctor is unable to understand the problem and psyche of a woman. Several times, she is misdiagnosed and mistreated. Gilman has raised this issue to make people aware of the misdiagnoses of a woman's mental health issues because the doctor disregarded the words of his patient. Gilman showed her readers that male doctors were not listening to their female patients. Gilman has raised the contemporary issue of rigid gender roles and their negative effects on both genders. The husband of the woman was represented

as a rational person, and he always took the doctor seriously. On the other hand, she represented a woman as an overemotional and was not taken seriously in the tale. According to Pallotta (2019), in this story, women were represented in prisons around the world. It was a great contribution to English literature. She raised the social and mental issues of a woman. At that time, women were not given equal rights and were supposed to obey their husbands and never challenge the authority of men. She discussed the collective psychological issue in this story. Collective psychology is a group of psychology that refers to the man as a member of a caste, race, profession, nation, or a part of a group of people who are organized for a certain purpose at a particular time. The woman in this story received medical treatment, which was impacted by collective psychology as a household; as she was mistreatment, it proved that women were used as a symbol to obey the domination of men either at the workplace or household. Women were considered inferior, and this interiorization was considered natural.

A room of One's Own is another contribution of The Harlem Renaissance written by Virginia Woolf in 1929. The purpose of this essay was to push back against a writer who claimed that women were born with less intellect as compared to men. Most of the men writers have written a lot on the issue that women were not as smart as men, however, there was very little literature produced by women to defend their stance. Woolf argued in her long essay that it was not innate inferiority that caused women to produce comparatively little more literature. The main theme of this essay the financial freedom, that woman needs the money and her room if she could write. Woolf added that women also need financial freedom in order to control their own lives and space. Another theme of this essay was the woman and society. If a woman has sufficient money there is another hindrance, which is society. Societal factor denies a woman to achieve these opportunities. A Room of One's Own is an essay based on feminism issues and class issues as well because it not only discusses the freedom of a woman but also the financial independence of a woman. A Room of One's Own also raised the point that women have an explicit legacy of writing to express their ideas and knowledge. Women had different roles parallel to men in society, especially military, how the women soldiers are stationed and how they relocate themselves on the battlefield (Harel-Shalev, 2019).

## The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Debates:

The contemporary issues related to appearance-related practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had long-standing roots. In the early age, women in America were not given due respect they deserved, and the man-dominant society considered women as symbols of sex and pleasure. Women were trying to look better and to be more attractive, so they had ingested vinegar, arsenic, and chalk to achieve fair complexion, they were kissing rosy crepe papers to redden their lips. Even there were black women in this competition of whitening their skin. In that era, paints and powders were used to increase their beauty, and women chose them as their destiny. However some activists tried to change and reform this issue of appearance and dressing, initially, their campaign got a little success. They tried to introduce some dress which was best fit for women, however soon it was dropped out after some journalists caricatured in a cruel violent way that women were stoned who wore them. For awareness,

many doctors, editors of women's magazines, educators, and many authors have supported this reform. Meanwhile, the bicycle and other physical exertions of women became famous, and women also worked as paid labour in the market. It was the first wave of this change. In the second wave, women were feminism got more fundamental and sustainable changes, such as the growth of the beauty industry in the 1960s.

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the pioneer writers of The Harlem Renaissance, she wrote *Sweat* a short story about woman empowerment against her abusive husband. This story has highlighted feminism related issues, the story was published in 1926 for the first time. This story was about a woman who was domestically abused; she was a religiously devout laundress (Jenkins, 2016). The main theme of this story was good vs evil, however, it also incorporated the theme of hard work vs laziness. The main character of this story is Delia Jones, who is a laundress who supports herself and her husband, Sykes. Delia, in this story, is a symbol of virtue and purity, as she is doing laundry, regularly attending church, and being loyal to her husband and everyone. Sykes is a cruel person in this story; he is not a good husband and represents his violence and loafing towards his wife. Sykes was taking advantage of his wife's deathly fear of snakes, so he tortured her throughout the story. He attempted many times to bring a caged rattlesnake into their home. Once, Delia stood up to her husband and asked to remove the snake from their home. Sykes didn't remove the snake and hide it in Delia's laundry hamper, and he was hoping that snake will bite Delia, however, the snake has bitten him, and he was killed. It was an example of karma and fate. He was brought down by his deed; he was digging a ditch for her. Delia married him for 15 years. However, this marriage was not a good experience for her. She was beaten, and there were countless painful acts against her. She was a brave and hardworking woman who had to build a house she wanted. In this story, the author has highlighted the point that women were considered inferior and there was no self-respect for women. Delia's husband didn't respect her, and neither was his work respected. He used to step on the dresses she had cleaned.

*In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* is an essay written by Alice Walker, an African American woman writer. She was one of the pioneer writers of the Harlem Renaissance; she raised both ethnicity and gender issues in her essay. She talked about African American women and their hidden talents, which were suppressed in slavery. A woman lost her artistic skills and talent because of her forced way of life and slavery. Walker raised a point that her mother and her grandmother's lives had been suppressed due to their dark and sad past. They had some talent, and their lives were not completely lost. According to Meng (2019), black women have many talents, they have intense spiritualism, and their bodies have vivid signs of punishment every single day. Walker was appealing to all the audience regardless of their race or ethnicity. The essay was about the talent the previous generations had and the problems they faced from society, being a woman of a minority group. It was about the discovery of the garden of her mother. It was for those women, too, who believed that their mothers and grandmothers had less artistic skills and were artistically inferior. The author defended these women, as they didn't lack talent, but they were experiencing hardship in the man-dominant society. It is a fact that slavery has a great adverse impact on society. Alice Walker didn't use any hypothetical examples in her essay because she had real-life examples of her previous generations.

The African American women had certain pitiful and sad stories. However, she failed to present any successful artist who wrote her real-life story of the era of slavery. She included in her essay that Phillis Wheatley's mother was a great artist, and she helped her daughter with her achievements. Due to poverty and other hardships, our mothers and grandmothers were not getting a chance to express their artistic selves and their very own gardens.

African American was the deprived ethnic group of the USA; they had experienced slavery for centuries. They had faced many difficulties and discrimination from the white population. They had fewer opportunities for education, jobs, and a better life. Black women in the 19th century were highly vulnerable; they didn't have their basic rights and were confined to obeying their men. However, in the 20th century, great migration took place to achieve a better financial position and save their art. The Harlem Renaissance was the explosion of artists, intellectuals, and social workers in Harlem near New York during the 1920s. It was a great changing incident for the Afro-American cultural history. It provided an opportunity for black writers and artists to achieve control over their culture and to contribute their culture and issues to place them in the Western high culture (Zamora, 2017). The black woman writers are highly talented and they wrote on contemporary issues such as gender, class, religion, and ethnicity. Most of the women writers wrote about the man dominancy and their cruel attitude toward their women. So, feminism was the contemporary issue they had raised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the black American women talked about the hardship of their parents and also tried to save their culture, symbols and their arts.

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