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## African American Apartheid: Scourge of the Past

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *In this paper, the aims are to identify the core issues of the African American community, who are still marginalized. The issue of Apartheid, although resolved through legislative amendments, the social acceptance is still under process. Tracing the history during the Civil Rights movement and historical legislative reforms, this paper comments on the narrative of the Afro-American struggle. Writers like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison also add to the emotional quotient of the movement, highlighting the ongoing struggle in the fields of literature, music, politics, and art. In addition, the paper also registers a strong front for understanding the concept of slavery in modern world*

**Methodology and Approach:** *The author has consulted the primary and secondary sources as part of his research. Further, with the research, historical chronology and narratives following the discourse of the history have become critical for bringing forth the issue of Apartheid.*

**Outcome:** *Through this paper, it has come to the understanding of the researcher that the concept of slavery, although an issue of the past, is not only relevant to the understanding of historical canonical movements but also to the American literary texts that comment on society as a whole.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *Although the era of slavery has ended, the concept of modern slavery is taking hold in the post-modern world. On similar lines, understanding the ravages of the past, the trauma of Apartheid in the African-American community is yet to be accepted.*

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African-American literature can be defined as writings that have been written by people who are living in the United States and have African genealogy. It is regarded as a varied form of writing catering to a block of marginalized people. In these writings is the past that is rooted in the present and would eventually grow out as a subject matter in future. The glass menagerie of African culture was misplaced in American context by the system of Apartheid, resulting in legal segregation of blacks and whites or Africans and Americans. Exploring the amalgamation of two independent and contrasting cultures, that of Africa and America in the backdrop of American façade, this paper resides on the premises of Afro-American narratives. Although the genealogy of morals of American constitution as laid by the constitution makers and as modified by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. are evolutionistic but the part of action was delayed. Waiting for the talks for the rights of the Afro-Americans the part of action has been left behind leaving large footprints of misery, anger and debt of sorrow on the part of Afro-Americans. Stories like ‘Flight’ by John Steinbeck, ‘The Man who was almost a Man’ by Richard Wright, ‘Sonny’s Blues’ by James Baldwin and novels like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker feature the state of Afro-American society opening two windows sighting apartheid and art.

Elaborating on the above narrative, the political terminology of the African American population can be understood as mentioned below: Nearly 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans in Southern states still inhabited a starkly unequal world of disenfranchisement, segregation and various forms of oppression, including race-inspired violence. “Jim Crow” laws at the local and state levels barred them from classrooms and bathrooms, from theaters and train cars, from juries and legislatures. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine that formed the basis for state-sanctioned discrimination, drawing national and international attention to African Americans’ plight. In the turbulent decade and a half that followed, civil rights activists used nonviolent protest and civil disobedience to bring about change, and the federal government made legislative headway with

initiatives such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Many leaders from within the African American community and beyond rose to prominence during the Civil Rights era, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Andrew Goodman and others. They risked—and sometimes lost—their lives in the name of freedom and equality. (Sutori)

Since the beginning people of African-American origin were not granted complete citizenship rights that includes women and men without property. As one of the strong features of America's history and civil rights movements, or “freedom struggles”, it helped in streamlining the narratives of the movement by providing a common thread of issue. In particular, revolutionary movements raising the issues of civil rights and social recognition for black Americans have had special historical significance. In that period in history, the writers of colour were profoundly affected, influenced and imprisoned by the American movement. For liberation under the aegis of modern thought and to restructure the American movement the resistance that arose against the selective nature of the American movement gave birth to a concept that later became known as Black Nationalism. Many writers like James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry and Martin Luther King while understanding the metamorphosing American society tried to resolve these parochial issues that metastasized to the issues of national importance.

These movements gradually developed and became a cause for granting of citizenship rights for blacks. In addition, the resistance against the idea of apartheid redeveloped and evolved the prevailing basic conceptions and meaning of civil rights. It also attracted the attention of the government and enabled it to protect these civil rights for those who have been marginalized. The constitutional amendments that abolished slavery in America came at a great cost and were one of the greatest achievements of civil rights movement. The citizenship for blacks in America was established post-civil war reforms that was long due. It had a snowball effect on the society as a whole where the judicial verdicts with legislation based on these amendments reformed the old trends and thought

process of judiciary and the society. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are two examples that caused the transformational changes in the identity of Blacks and their narrative. These legal reforms increased the opportunities that were then available to even those who were outside the ambit of the larger picture of the American Revolution like women, disabled individuals, non-black minorities and people who faced discrimination and empowered them to move ahead in social life. The civil rights movement in the post-war United States can also be understood with the historical timeline mentioned in the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov.in](http://www.loc.gov.in)). It begins with the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott. This protest was led by Martin Luther King Jr against segregated public facilities in Alabama.

As seen, the modern period of civil rights reform has been divided into several phases. Like all the revolutions and movements of history, each begins at an individualistic level and as isolated events with small-scale protests. These protests combine and ultimately resulted in the creation of more reformed militant movements with varied narratives and different ideologies as dictated by the leaders through organizations. It is a historically known fact as illustrated in the *Library of Congress* that the Brown decision demonstrated that the litigation strategy of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) could undermine the legal foundations of southern segregationist practices, but the approach only worked when blacks, acting individually or in small groups, assumed the risks associated with crossing racial barriers. Thus, even after the Supreme Court declared that public school segregation was unconstitutional black activism became necessary to compel the federal government to implement the decision and extend its principles to all areas of public life rather than simply in schools. Therefore, during the 1950s and 1960s, NAACP-sponsored legal suits while at the same time it supplemented the legislative lobbying by an increasingly massive and militant social movement.

Martin Luther King, Jr., used nonviolent tactics in the same way as used by Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian national movement. "...I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian

method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom,” (Luther) he explained in his essay ‘My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence’.

For every subsequent black movement and back aspiration that were scattered throughout the country King remained the major spokesperson. But especially in Montgomery, individuals other than King initiated most subsequent black movements that got merged with the major stream of the movement. For example, as mentioned in Britannica encyclopedia, on February 1, 1960, four freshmen at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College began a wave of student sit-ins designed to end segregation at southern lunch counters. These sit-in protests spread rapidly throughout the South and led to the founding, in April 1960, of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The major difference between these sit-in protests and those that of Martin Luther King Jr. was that these student-led group were polarized and radically aggressive in using the nonviolent tactics.

After the 1960s, protest activity decreased due to harsh government repression, internal conflicts among black militant groups, killings of Malcolm X followed by the killing of Martin Luther King. The African-American freedom movement still made a lasting impact on American society. Even though there were improvements in civil rights during the 1960s, continued racial discrimination alongside oppression played a major role in pushing the American community towards reforms. Even after President Johnson declared a war on poverty and King initiated a Poor People’s Campaign in 1968, the distribution of the nation’s wealth and income moved toward greater inequality during the 1970s. Civil rights advocates recognized that the integration of schools had not led to noticeable advancements in the lives of impoverished African Americans, yet they were split on the next steps for promoting the progress of the black community. To a great extent, also, a significant portion of the civil rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s focused on protecting past achievements or enhancing law enforcement systems.

History has given us a lot of examples of how inequality can bring inevitable consequences. A man can never be a “master” of another man no matter what color of skin he has. Being a minority does not mean to be of a minor importance. Every man is in the first place a personality and our history is the best reflection of how people should not behave towards each other and a lesson of “respect” to all the people on our planet and their right to live and to be equal.

The unrecorded past of the slaves is unveiled through their recollections and their bitter living conditions are depicted to be more important than the acknowledged history. References are from an important period that was characterized by three major events during the American history that happened between 1854 and 1873 beginning with the Fugitive Slave Act, secondly, the American Civil War and finally, the Reconstruction Period.

By playing against and through the cultural field of postmodernism *Beloved* creates an aesthetic identity. Each character in the novel has been damaged by being black during the plantation era. The daily life of the slaves in the plantations and their persecutions by their masters are more important than those major historical events. Slaves were considered as property by the plantation owners. Once Halle and Sethe decide themselves on marrying, she enthusiastically asks Mrs. Garner about the wedding ceremony, to which she answers “you are a sweet little child.” (p. 50, Morrison)

Slavery was not only a social issue at large it was also an individualistic issue that was strongly embedded in the African-American family. While looking at the narratives and capitalist habit of the society to thrive on cheap labour coming out of slavery, the mother who is trying to protect her offspring take a drastic and deadly measure by committing a murder. Sethe daughters Denver and *Beloved* have a questionable sense of “Self” and a fragmented identity. As voiced by Kimberly Chabot Davis, “Postmodern theories need to be modified to accommodate texts like *Beloved* with an overt political agenda of social protest and to recognize these fictions as contributions to a theoretical discourse of contemporary life.” (p. 257, Davis)

In the words of Rafael Perez-Torres, “Sethe’s body is violated: once when its nutrient is stolen, then again when torn open by a whip. Just like the page of Schoolteacher’s notebook, Sethe is divided and marked, inscribed with the discourse of slavery and violation” (p. 696, Torres). The fight for freedom and civil rights by African Americans and women was marked by both bloodshed and disappointment. While some of them were seeking consolation in the sincere fight for natural human freedom, others were trying to prove to themselves and the rest of the American society that the government was devoid of power to govern civil relations in the U.S. Slavery and obedience are forever carved into the 19th century’s history in the United States, having turned into a continuous fight for the right for self-realization. For the majority of African Americans, their journey to freedom has turned into the journey to civil rights revolution – the revolution that has brought with it the new reality, where white dominance was no longer relevant. All men have the right for revolution; but revolutions do not necessarily lead to the formation of a new democratic society; rather, revolutions result in the emergence of a new type of civil majority that can hardly achieve all goals and objectives of this revolutionary movement.

The opposition to civil obedience was difficult, bloody, and tiresome. For the majority of enslaved African Americans, the fight for freedom was the central goal of their miserable lives. Kidnapping and violence were characteristic of their daily performance, but none of them was prepared to reconcile with the increasing social discrepancies between the black and the white. “From what I can recollect of these battles, they appear to have been irruptions of one little state or district on the other to obtain prisoners or booty. Perhaps they were incited to this by those traders who brought the European goods I mentioned amongst us.” (Equiano)

Ignoring the anger, hatred, and rage of Africans fighting for their freedom is difficult; ignoring the anger and hatred they faced after being enslaved is also challenging. Further, it is also difficult to neglect the feeling of dominance that governed white people in their striving to acquire more slaves and to turn them into instruments of slavery who have to do unbearable labor. Enslavement could not have any social, economic, or legal justifications; yet, it remains and will



forever remain a part of our history. The life of slaves was far from fabulous; many of them found themselves “regretting their own existence, and wishing themselves dead; and but the hope of being free, they had no doubt that they should have killed themselves, or done something for which they should have been killed” (Douglass). Nothing could push the slaves to changing their negative attitudes to life, except for release from enslavement and long-anticipated freedom. While slaves were vainly fighting for freedom, they have gradually realized the futility of their social attempts to overcome long-term social traditions.

The legacy of America’s nearly three hundred - year history of slavery - on which America had built its wealth as a nation (Horton and Horton 7)—and its violent and oppressive aftermath were continuing to blight the lives of all African Americans. Patricia Hill Collins has noted that the conditions African Americans had to undergo in the South in the years after Emancipation has set the stage for intergenerational Black poverty that continues to this day.

Morrison was asked by Carolyn Denard in 1998 how important the South was. “Most of the major themes and threats I think had originated there,” Morrison added. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has pointed out, the Africans who arrived in America did not start from scratch: “The black Africans who survived the dreaded ‘Middle Passage’ from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone,” but carried with them meaningful aspects of cultures: music, myths, rituals, and “forms of performance” (p. 4, Gates). He assigns to the black vernacular tradition, in which Morrison has been steeped her entire life, the role of “that liminal crossroads of culture contact and ensuing difference at which Africa meets Afro-America.” One has to write outside the white gaze. As Morrison has put it in her Q&A with *The Common Reader*, “We have already invented so much art. It’s just lying there to be picked up and used and shined and cleaned.” (np)

For years, the American society was characterized by the growing pressure of the so-called “white dominance” imposed on other nations under the cover of “technical advancement and economic progress”. Simultaneously, the



American government was creating a new type of civil vision, where citizens were primarily subjects, and only afterwards, human beings. “All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable” (Thoreau). Thus, the question arises, can one speak about the equality and equity of civil rights between the races, while the government officially refuses to promote public democratic ideals? Slavery left an indelible dark spot in human history; yet, when slavery was abolished in the United States did not bring the anticipated results, and those fighting for freedom found themselves in the civil vacuum, unable to protect themselves from external social pressures.

‘Sonny’s Blues’ was written in 1957, a period of unrest marking the beginning of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. It is also the time when Harlem’s African American population peaked in the 1950’s. Although lynching is never referred to directly in the story, this contributed to creating a tense atmosphere of racial hatred and fear between the two communities of opposite color and race. ‘Sonny’s Blues’ is of the period in which Blacks struggle with Harlem’s deterioration, drug addiction, and post-World War II America. Here we have the Harlem image of a cruel and corrupted world, where kids already have lost hope and there seems to be no reason for living vs. a movement where black people had a cultural boom and hope began flourishing.

Jazz was inspired by Blues. The Blues was the music that delivered with it a depressed mood, and was rooted in the hardships of slavery of the African American people. Sonny was heavily influenced by Charlie Parker, a famous jazz player. Jazz at the time was a controversial music and something new at the time that expressed ideas differently. However, Jazz is not completely similar to other types of music in which you sing to a rhythm. In jazz, you have to be able to know your instrument very well so that you can create a rhythm to what you want to say, “...he was giving it back, as everything must be given back.” (Baldwin)

Before the time of the Harlem Renaissance, jazz did not use the piano as a regular instrument. So here the piano symbolizes this sort of coming of age, which expresses the hope of many people realizing their dreams and having a

better chance at their lives. “I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn’t crazy” (Baldwin). In this text, it is evident that the author's intention does not rely on the premise to convey a sense of utter despair in his writing, but rather to show that despite the challenges in life, there is always potential for improvement.

In criticizing Baldwin’s depiction of Harlem in *Another Country*, Murray write, “What Baldwin writes about is not really life in Harlem. He writes about the economic and social conditions in Harlem, the material plight of Harlem,” not it’s full “life.” Baldwin writes that “in all jazz, and especially in the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged” (Williams). Finally, Sonny’s Blues is the image of the hope that many people had, and only few were able to attain.

All men have the right to revolution. The fight for freedom and the civil movement against slavery stand as an example that America was incapable of developing and implementing effective legislative policies that would support civil rights in favor of the black majority. “No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. They are rare in the history of the world. There are orators, politicians, and eloquent men, by the thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his mouth to speak who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of the day” (Thoreau). While African Americans were dreaming of becoming free, women were similarly preoccupied with their striving to establish gender equality.

As African American slaves viewed their masters tyrannical by nature, the female attitudes toward men who could vote were also the same: “that your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up – the harsh tide of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend” (Adams). Unfortunately, the fight for gender equity and the fight against slavery were nothing more but the realization of one’s right for revolution. It is difficult to argue to Thoreau: all men (and now, women) have the right for revolution, but the fight for equity and freedom was thorny, and beyond winning the right for freedom and the right to vote, the fighters had a difficult task of changing public perceptions about

themselves. Revolutions bring dramatic changes, but they rarely lead us to achieving the anticipated social results.

Moreover, revolutions can never satisfy all our social needs and cannot satisfy all participants of a particular social fight. African Americans have finally defeated the long-lasting stereotypes regarding subordination of the black people; simultaneously, the current social emphasis on the increasing domination of the white society suggests that Afro-Americans were not able to achieve all social goals. Women have certainly won the right to vote, but have they become happier? “All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail” (Thoreau).

In the narrative of the American Revolution, all men and women have the right for revolution. In the creation of an ideology, all men and women have the right to defend their civil freedoms and equity. All men and women, however, find themselves unable to satisfy all social needs, and with one revolution coming to a logical end, the need for another revolutionary movement is never satisfied. Pieces of works that are now part of literary discourse like *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano, The Letter between Abigail Adams and her Husband John Adams, Thoreau’s *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, and *Narrative of Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass suggest that the social fight and the striving to have more civil rights will never come to an end. Rather, the narrative will turn into a continuous process of redefining and proving to ourselves that we can still use our right for revolution, even when such revolutions do not bring the anticipated civil and social results.

Alice Walker—a former Ms. Magazine editor, the daughter of sharecroppers—published *The Color Purple* in 1982. It was the first work by a black woman to win both the Pulitzer and National Book awards. Beyoncé

appropriation aside, though, the story isn't about feminism as much as it is about empowering its audience by unburdening us of pathos and cultural shame.

Both the novel and the film adaptation were a controversial and cathartic affront to the politics of respectability—the black middle class value set that dictates which behaviors are “appropriate” for black people. The protagonist, Celie, is a survivor of incest who lives most of her life as the servant of a violent man who refuses to marry her; in his eyes, her ugliness makes her fit for backbreaking work and little else. Set in rural Georgia in the early twentieth century, the narrative is about abuse: physical, emotional, and sexual—the story of a black woman who is raped by her stepfather and only escapes to be caught in a relationship with another tyrannical man, “Mr. —. (Albert)”

Spike Lee said that the Steven Spielberg–produced film was “done with hate,” and that the Mr.— character was a “one-note animal.” The Coalition Against Black Exploitation protested *The Color Purple*'s 1985 Los Angeles premiere for its depiction of black men abusing black women. The novelist Ishmael Reed called *The Color Purple* “a Nazi conspiracy,” and even suggested that both the novel and the film were critically acclaimed expressly because they slam black men.

Reed was wrong then and he's wrong now. The popularity of *The Color Purple* is largely unrelated to maligning black men. Instead, the issue is entirely related to black women's refusal of respectability politics: from Celie and Shug's lesbian relationship, to portraying traditional Christianity as narrow-minded and suffocating; to the story's claim that domestic violence stems from patriarchal paranoia of women's power, not their vulnerability.

Black women turned out in droves to see the film. We continue to reference it today because it breaks a certain cultural silence about abuse. Respectability politics imperil black women by demanding we stay mute, they insist that black people stand like a monolith whose reputation must be protected and preserved, whatever the cost. This extends to art, which appears only to be acceptable if black characters are struggling to “get better,” to put checkered pasts

firmly in the past. But the truth is obvious. We aren't interested in stories about the perfect; we're interested in stories about the real.

The way of African Americans to freedom was not easy; nor was the way of women to gender equity. However, with the right to vote and right for being free, have these people become happier? Certainly, primary historical documents imply the growing need for changing the existing structure of social relations; yet, these very documents imply that we were unable to satisfy all social needs. Abolition of slavery and gender equity have turned into the two revolutionary achievements that have turned the course of history and have also predetermined gradual change of social attitudes towards voting rights and slavery. However, as African Americans and women were proving their right for rebellion, they faced the growing social challenges in the form of long-lasting attitudes toward slavery and voting rights. Ultimately, when the need for one revolution is satisfied, it necessarily brings the need for another revolution, turning rebellion into a never ending historical process.

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