



## **RACE AND RACISM IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**



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### **ABSTRACT**

*African-American literature is designed with a mission to make their consciousness known to the world. Its aim is to change social, political, economical aspects of society. African-American literature has proceeded along with different paths and taken different turnings. There were a lot of issues held in the African American countries like a race, racism, identity, Ethnicity, racial discrimination, slavery system, Racial segregation, etc. thus*

*in this system the people were exploited by white people. They were not considered as human being in the society so they suffered a lot from social injustice and inequality and these problems were reflected through writing in African American English literature. Thus, in this present research paper we are going to focus on race and racism concept.*

### **KEYWORDS**

*African-American literature, race, racism, identity, Ethnicity*

## RESEARCH PAPER

### **Introduction :**

The study of racism in Afro-American English literature requires an examination of the social structure of “racial” groups and racial inequalities. Racism is the belief that groups of humans possess different behavioural traits corresponding to physical appearance and can be divided based on the superiority of one race over another. Modern variants of racism are often based in social perceptions of biological differences among the people. These views can take the form of social actions, practices or beliefs, or political systems in which different races are ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities, or qualities.

### **Definition of Race and Racism :**

The concept of race corresponds to occupy a highly argumentative area of academic debate. The word ‘race’ has been associated with ideas of inferiority and superiority, hierarchy and persecution. Race as a science, race as a pseudo-science, race as a social construct. As Miles (1993) argues, whatever the manner in which the term is used it implies.

*“an acceptance of the existence of biological differences between human beings, differences which express the existence of distinct, self reproducing groups.”*

*“Race refers to a category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, and stature. A key question about race is whether it is more of a biological category or a social category.”*

Most people think of race in biological terms, and for more than three hundred years, or ever since white Europeans began colonizing nations filled with people of color, people have been identified as belonging to one race or another based on certain biological features. It is now widely accepted that this classification system was in fact created for social and political reasons. There are actually more genetic and biological differences within the racial groups defined by society than between different groups.

When we defined Racism concept so, it is a relatively modern concept, arising in the European age of imperialism, the subsequent growth of capitalism, and especially the Atlantic slave trade. This means that, although the concepts of race and racism are based on

observable biological characteristics, any conclusions drawn about race on the basis of those observations are heavily influenced by cultural ideologies. Racism, as an ideology, exists in a society at both the individual and institutional level. However Racism defined as..

*“an ideology of racial group superiority that justifies or prescribes a system of racial domination or exploitation, racism is perpetuated by the beliefs and behaviours of individuals and by the institutions in which they are embedded.”*

*“The marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people.”*

Racism is a combination of systems, institutions and factors that advantage white people and for people of color, cause widespread harm and disadvantages in access and opportunity. One person or even one group of people did not create systemic racism, rather it is grounded in the history of our laws and institutions which were created on a foundation of white supremacy exists in the institutions and policies that advantage white people and disadvantage people of color; and takes places in interpersonal communication and behaviour (e.g., slurs, bullying, offensive language) that maintains and supports systemic inequities and systemic racism.

In the above definition, the term “white supremacy” refers to the systematic marginalization or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges people who identify as white. It does not refer to extremist ideologies which believe that white people are genetically or culturally superior to non-whites and/or that white people should live in a whites-only society. It is certainly easy to see that people in the United States and around the world differ physically in some obvious ways. The most noticeable difference is skin tone: Some groups of people have very dark skin, while others have very light skin. Using such physical differences as their criteria, scientists at one point identified as a race. In America, racism spread around in the country especially in south and black people were treated rudely. They did not have full rights as the white citizens. The Africans were considered as ruthless and ugly people. Many black people lost their right and given different names like colored, Negros, Black, African American.

Historical examples of attempts to place people in racial categories further underscore the social constructionism of race. In the South during the time of slavery, the skin tone of slaves lightened over the years as babies were born from the union, often in the form of rape, of slave owners and other whites with slaves. When slaves were first brought to the Americas almost four hundred years ago, many more were taken to Brazil, where slavery was not abolished until 1888, than to the land that eventually became the United States. Brazil was then a colony of Portugal, and the Portuguese used Africans as slave labor. Just as in the United States, a good deal of interracial reproduction has occurred since those early days, much of it initially the result of rape of women slaves by their owners, and Brazil over the centuries has had many more racial intermarriages than the United States. So people are to be treated with dignity, they require economic rights, social rights including education, and the rights to cultural and political participation and civil liberty. . However its moment is struggle for human rights and against exploitation of white people.

#### **Race and Racism in African American Literature :**

This research paper focuses on how ‘race and racism’ are evidently brought out in the African American English literature. African American literature is grounded in the experience of black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of the United States history, they were not accepted as citizens and were obviously discriminated. These all problems or issues of race and racism were focused by authors in African American literature. Authors described their views by writing work such as poems, drama, novels etc. and helped to capture the voice of the nation. They have fearlessly explored racism, abuse and violence as well as love, beauty and music. While their names and styles have changed over the years, they have been the voices of their generations and helped inspire the generations that followed them. It is very difficult to analysis race and racism in a single research paper so, we are focussing on few important figures who were freshly shaping much of racial discourse.

**Maya Angelou** was American poet, author and activist. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928. Often referred to as a spokesman for African Americans and women through her many works, her gift of words connected all people who were “committed to raising the



moral standards of living in the United States.” She was influenced by Black authors like Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, her love of language developed at a young age. Her most famous work “*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” was published in 1969 and became the first in seven autobiographies of Angelou’s life. She was a prolific poet, her words often depicted Black beauty, the strength of women and the human spirit, and the demand for social justice. Her first collection of poems “*Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie*” was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1972, the same year she became the first Black woman to have a screenplay produced. Writing for adults and children, Angelou was one of several African American women at the time who explored the Black female autobiographical tradition.

**James Baldwin** was born in Harlem in 1924, Though he spent most of his life living abroad to escape the racial prejudice in the United States, James Baldwin is the typical American writer. He was best known for his reflections on his experience as an openly gay Black man in white America, his novels, essays and poetry make him a social critic who shared the pain and struggle of Black Americans. His “*Go Tell it on the Mountain*” work was published in 1953. He described the Speaking with passion and depth about the Black struggle in America and it has become an American classic work. In his ‘*Giovanni’s Room*’(1956) raised the issues of race and homosexuality at a time when it was taboo. And during the Civil Rights Movement, he published three of his most important collections of essays, “*Notes of a Native Son*” (1955), “*Nobody Knows My Name*” (1961) and “*The Fire Next Time*” (1963). In this way James Baldwin provided motivation for later generations of artists to speak out about the race and gay experiences in Black America.

**Amiri Baraka** was Born in 1934, known as a poet, writer and political activist. Amiri Baraka used his writing as a weapon against racism and became one of the most widely published African American writers. He was known for his social criticism and incendiary style, Baraka explored the anger of Black Americans and advocated scientific socialism. Often aggressive and intended to awaken audiences to the political needs of Black Americans, Baraka was a prominent voice in American literature. He was often focusing on Black Liberation and White Racism, he spent his most of life for fighting the rights of African

Americans. His representations of race and wisdom have made him an influential part of the Black Arts Movement along with Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Maya Angelou.

**Richard Wright** was born in Mississippi in 1908. He was best known for his novels 'Native Son and Black Boy,' that reflected his own struggle with poverty and coming of age journey. This work focusing on the struggle of Blacks in America for equality and economic advancement. His novel 'Black Boy' was a personal account of growing up in the South and eventual move to Chicago where he became a writer and joined the Communist Party.

**Toni Morrison** was the greatest novelist who was awarded Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize. Toni Morrison was considered the voice of African American women. She had published 'The Bluest Eye' in 1970 and 'Sula' in 1973, 'The Song of Solomon' was the book that set her on the course of literary success. In 'The Bluest Eye' Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, prays every day for beauty. Mocked by other children for the dark skin, curly hair, and brown eyes that set her apart, she desires for normalcy, for the light-coloured hair and blue eyes that she believes will allow her to finally fit in. Yet as her dream grows more eager, her life slowly starts to collapse in the face of adversity and trouble. A powerful examination of our fascination with beauty and conformity, Toni Morrison's first novel asks powerful questions about race, class, and gender with the sensitivity.

**William Edward Burghardt Du Bois** in his canonical work of American literature. "The Souls of Black Folk," the masterpiece in Du Bois's considerable composition, has justified every bit of critical acclaim and clarification. It was received since its publication in 1903. Du Bois's achievement was to employ two tropes that summarized both the history of a people freed from centuries of human bondage and railing at the beginning of a new century against the most diabolical attempts to deconstruct the transformations shaped by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and entrap African Americans once again as quasi-citizens stuck forever in the limbo of forms of neo- enslavement.

The following writers also explained very well the concept 'Race and Racism' in their work such as "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral(1773) ," by Phillis Wheatley, "Notes on the State of Virginia (1785)," by Thomas Jefferson, "An Essay on the Causes of Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species(second edition, 1810)," by Samuel

Stanhope Smith, “Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks (1816)” by Robert Finley, “An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829),” by David Walker, “Crania Americana (1839),” by Samuel Morton, “The Narrative of the Life (1845),” of Frederick Douglass, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852)” by Harriet Beecher Stowe, “Our Brother in Black: His Freedom and His Future (1881),” by Atticus Haygood , “Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro(1896),” by Frederick Hoffman , “The Color Purple (1982),” by Alice Walker, etc.

### **Conclusion :**

Thus, the dominant theoretical explanations of racial inequalities highlighted in African American literature by various authors. Authors analyzed race and racism concept at the micro-level and focused specifically on social, psychological, economical, cultural, political and personal experiences. We find that racial discrimination is positively associated with increased crime in large part by extending depression, hostile, views of relationships, and disengagement from conventional norms. In this way, we can understand very well the concept of race and racism through the African American literature.

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