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# African-American Women Writers

## A Critical Introduction

## 美国黑人女作家评介

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（修订版）



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# Historical Overview

"Black women almost by definition have always been involved in the generation and sustenance of our literature and of our culture in general. One could, in fact, make the case that, the founders of Black American literature, in a formal sense, were women."

—Stephen E. Henderson in *Black Women Writers*

## Pioneering Voices

### Slavery

Black roots in American history were planted in the 17th century, when the slave trade extended from Europe to the New World of Americas. In 1619, one year before the Mayflower landing, a Dutch ship landed twenty Africans at the Jamestown colony. For about two hundred years ever since, millions of Africans from different tribes were captured by slave traders, packed into ships and carried through the Middle Passage from Africa to America. Many died from the unspeakable conditions on their voyage, and others died because they took their lives rather than live as slaves. Those who survived the long voyage had to survive lives as slaves. It is estimated that fifty million people (*To Be a Slave*, p. 27) were taken from the African continent during the years of the slave trade, and were scattered throughout South America,

the islands of the West Indies, and the United States.

Slavery differed from country to country, but it was in the United States that a system of slavery evolved that was more cruel and total than almost any other system of slavery devised by one group of men against another. No other country where blacks were enslaved destroyed African culture to the extent that it was destroyed in the United States. The slavery instituted by the founders of America has few comparisons for its far-reaching cruelty. (*To Be a Slave*, p. 27)

In *To Be a Slave*, Julius Lester writes: "There are two ways in which a man can be enslaved. One is through force. He can be penned behind fences, guarded constantly, punished severely for breaking the slightest rule, and made to live in constant fear. The second is to teach him to think that his own best interests will be served by doing what his master wishes him to do. He can be taught that he is inferior and that only through slavery will he be eventually rise to the 'level' of his masters." (p. 76)

The American southern slave owners used both ways. Slaves were made to work in the fields from the time when the stars began to fade from the sky in the morning until they reappeared in the evening, enduring meanwhile the severe whipping for the most trifling incidents and the constant threat of the auction block and murder. The following passages are narrated by ex-slaves:

> "My master used to throw me in a buck and whip me. He would put my hands together and tie them. Then he would strip me naked. Then he would make me squat

down. Then he would run a stick through behind my knees and in front of my elbow. My knee was up against my chest. My hands was tied together just in front of my shins. The stick between my arms and my knees held me in a squat. That's what they call a buck. You couldn't stand up and you couldn't get your feet out. You couldn't do nothing but just squat there and take what he put on. You couldn't move no way at all. Just try to. You just fall over on one side and have to stay there till you were turned over by him. He would whip me on one side till that was sore and full of blood and then he would whip me on the other side till that was all tore up. I got a scar big as the place my ol' mistress hit me. She took a bull whip once. The bull whip had a piece of iron in the handle of it—and she got mad. She was so mad she took the whip and hit me over the head with the butt end of it and the blood flew. It ran all down my back and dripped off my heels." (*To Be a Slave*, pp. 36-37)

"The number of lashes is graduated according to the nature of the case. Twenty-five are deemed a mere brush, inflicted, for instance, when a dry leaf or a piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field. Fifty is ordinary penalty following all delinquencies of the next higher grade. One hundred is called severe; it is the punishment inflicted for the serious offence of standing idle in the field." (*To Be a Slave*, p. 72)

Survival for female slaves was even harder. They had to endure the same harsh physical working conditions as their

male counterparts, as well as those accorded to them because of their sex. Their additional burdens were sexual exploitation—rape, and the demands of child-bearing. Regarded by the worst of owners as livestock, some were bred for sex and sale or put to work as children, and lived lives of unremitting toil.

> "My mother told me that he [slave owner] owned a woman who was the mother of seven children, and when her babies would get about a year or two of age, he'd sell them and it would break her heart. She never got to keep them. When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old, she just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up, and one day she said, 'I just decided I'm not to let ol' master sell this baby; he just ain't going to do it.' She got up and give it something out of a bottle and pretty soon it was dead." (*To Be a Slave*, p. 40)

The vulnerability of female slaves to sexual ambush and exploitation marks them off from white men, white women and from their male counterparts—black men.

The second way was more subtle. Its aim was to brainwash the slave, to destroy his mind and replace it with the mind of the master. When the first African slaves were sold at the slave market, the traders deliberately tore apart families and tribes. Children were taken from their mothers, husbands from wives. Whatever language they used to speak, Ashanti, Dahomey, Yoruba, Benin or Akan, these diverse

people were forced to learn a new language, English. Whatever their African names had been, they were given their masters' surnames, no matter how many owners they might have had during their lives. "Without a name of his own, the slave's ability to see himself apart from his owner was lessened." (*To Be a Slave*, p. 77) Religion was also used as an instrument to control the minds of the slaves. The slave owner did not allow the slaves to attend church by themselves, fearing that they would use the opportunity to plan an insurrection. So, he either did the preaching himself or hired a white preacher, or let a trusted slave preach. "... the religious teaching consists of teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault—for the Bible says, 'He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!'" "Be nice to massa and missus; don't be mean; be obedient, and work hard. That was all the Sunday school lesson they taught us." (*To Be a Slave*, p. 78) This is the kind of preaching a slave owner approved of: to make the slave happy to be a slave.

Laws were enacted to keep slaves illiterate and uneducated, so that they could not tell of their lives in bondage. It was a crime for anyone to teach, or attempt to teach, any slave to read or write, because, that might tend to excite dissatisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion.

Despite all the attempts of the whites to turn the slaves into "cultural orphans", memory and pride persisted, and the voice of the African-Americans, instead of being stifled, made

itself heard even in the darkest days of the slavery. Though not in written forms, an oral tradition was brought along by the slaves. The customs, history, traditions, and values of the black people were passed down verbally, and became the foundation of many African-American literary efforts today. The earliest types of the African oral tradition were the work songs and field hollers that the slaves called to one another as they worked in the fields. Another spoken tradition was the folktale. Early African-Americans shared folktales that expressed values, explained the unexplainable, and identified acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Folktales such as "How Buck Won His Freedom" and "People Who Could Fly" both entertained and gave hope to the enslaved people.

From the 17th century until the end of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1836, African-Americans for the most part remained in bondage. Because of the crippling conditions of slavery, few accounts of this period by black Americans are left. Yet, there were some black men and women who managed to tell their stories.

## Early Poetry

A limited amount of African-American literature had been written or published by the late 1700s. Early African-American poetry, such as that of Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, and Ann Plato, reflects the strong religious influence of the time. Lucy Terry, who wrote "Bars Fight" in 1746, was the first African-American woman to be published, and the second woman published in America. But most outstanding among them, from her own days to

ours, is the "slave-poet" of the 18th century: Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784).

The life of Phillis Wheatley approaches legendary status among early black American writers. She arrived from Africa in 1761, a frail and sickly little girl, and was bought by the Wheatleys to be made a house-servant. Phillis soon astounded her master and his family with her quick wit and unusual intelligence. Within sixteen months of her arrival in America, she could apparently read the most difficult parts of the Bible, and at the age of twelve, she began to study Latin, translating Ovid. Very often she was used by her master as a showpiece to recite her poems at social gatherings. Phillis was a slave in status, but won fame as a poet. The strain and strangeness of this situation shows in her writings and in her life. Her poetry praised her masters, their society, and their Christian religion, but rarely made any mention of the enslavement of the blacks. Only in a few instances did she allude to her own conditions, but in a fairly detached manner. In 1773, her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, a book of 30 poems, was published in London, where she was received as "an anthropological curiosity and as an example of the benefits accorded African slaves by American civilization". (*Black American Writers*, p. 6). Following the death of her master and mistress, Phillis Wheatley married, left the realm of polite society, and eventually died in poverty at an early age. It has been said that Phillis Wheatley traveled "from an unmarked village in Africa... to an unmarked grave in America." (*Render Me My Song*, p. 6)

Phillis Wheatley's poetry was not subjected to substantial

analysis until the 20th century. Written in the fashionable style of such English poets as Alexander Pope and Thomas Gray, her work is quite proper to neoclassical standards, sophisticated rather than primitive, artificial rather than spontaneous, and polished rather than crude. At the same time, her interest in nature illustrated an incipient romanticism. One critic regretted that "had she come under the influence of Wordsworth, Byron or Keats or Shelley, she would have done greater work." (*Black American Writers*, p. 11). However, her silence about enslavement and the lack of social protests in her poetry also evoked strong criticisms. Whatever commentaries there might be, favorable or unfavorable, Phillis Wheatley, as a black female slave in a world dominated by white men, disproved with her poetry the white assumption that the blacks were incapable of ever aspiring to the same level of literacy as their white masters. And the fact that she became one of the best known poets of her era was in itself a remarkable feat.

## Slave Narrative

Following on the heels of Phillis Wheatley, the African-American literary genre to take precedence at the end of the 18th century and well into the 19th century was the slave narrative.

Slave narratives are autobiographical accounts about the life of African-Americans under slavery by the fugitive slaves before the Civil War and by former slaves in the post-bellum era from the perspective of first-hand experience. This genre was first produced in England in the 18th century, but it soon

became a mainstay of African-American literature. During the first half of the 19th century the American Anti-Slavery Society and other northern abolition groups took down the stories of thousands of blacks who escaped from the South. Eventually some six thousand former slaves from North America and the Caribbean wrote accounts of their lives, with about 150 of these published as separate books or pamphlets.

Slave narratives use a similar form; they are chronological in structure, episodic, and provide little transition. They describe in a plain style and first person sober tone the appalling physical and emotional cruelty of slavery from their departure from Africa to their flight to freedom. There are auction blocks, lashings, escapes, and recaptures; there are tears and prayers and exhortations; there are special providences recorded, coincidences, suspenseful moments in flight, and tricks to outwit captors. In them, men record their anger, resistance, and intention to shake the dominant white society, women their abuse, rape and desolation. While the former are more involved in social rather than personal concerns, the latter ponder the personal and the intimate, salvage their emotional highs and lows, and express the strong demand for self-fulfillment.

The earliest printed version of slave narrative is *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa*, recorded by Thomas Bluett, an English colonist, and published in London in 1734. In 1787 the first black woman's narrative, *Belinda, or the Crulety of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon*, was published in the United States. The most outstanding among the slave

narratives by black women published before the Civil War was *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861). The author's real name was Harriet Jacobs 1813-1897, but she used the pseudonym "Linda Brent" for fear of her life. Although this was published in 1861, it was not until 1981 that African-American male scholars were ready to accept Jacob's authorship. This work is ground-breaking in that Harriet Jacobs takes bold steps to discuss the complex situation of black women in America as a result of their slave status, and her "attempt to develop a framework in which to discuss the social, political and economic consequences of black womanhood prefigured the concerns of black women intellectuals after Emancipation". (*Render Me My Song*, p. 11)

Other slave narratives of note by black women include *Narrative and Book of Life* (1878) by Sojourner Truth, who, questioning the construction of gender in American society and asking why it excluded black women, bared her breasts at an anti-slavery convention and asked "Ain't I a woman?"; and *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868) by Elizabeth Keckley, who, being beaten and raped in slavery, bought her freedom with money, secured a position in the White House under President Abraham Lincoln, and became a close associate of the president's wife.

There were others, many of them, who dared death to tell a life full of pain, to have their voice heard, to make their desire for freedom understood. By using the first-person "I" in the slave narratives, the oppressed slaves moved from object to

subject, from silence into creating a revolutionary literature—one that changed the nature and direction of African-American literature. "If the slave narratives began by positing the 'I', they do it to dramatically wrest the individual black subject out of anonymity, inferiority, and brutal disdain. The 'I' stands against and negates the perception of the black person as indistinguishable from the mass, as slave, as animal. The 'I' proclaims voice, subject, and the right to history and place." (*African-American Women's Writing*, p. 37)

There is no denying that slave narratives were at the root of much of the black writing that followed. Take African-American women writers alone, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and the fictionalized autobiography sequence of Maya Angelou, grow from the slave narrative. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, J. California Cooper's *Family*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* bear the direct influence of the slave narrative. Stephen Butterfield, an African-American scholar, identifies slave narratives as the building bricks of black American literature:

> "And little by little, book by book, they construct the framework of a black American literature. Autobiography in their hands becomes so powerful, so convincing a testimony to human resource, intelligence, endurance, love in the face of tyranny, that, in a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent black American writing." (*Black American Women's Writing*, pp. 13-14)

## Spiritual Autobiographies

Spiritual autobiography is a non-fictional form which rose to prominence in the 17th century England. The form's basic concern is to trace the progress of an individual believer from a state of sin to a state of grace. For African-Americans this form conveys a much deeper meaning and significance. If the slave narratives express in particular the narrators' awareness of a physical self, the spiritual autobiographies express an awareness of the spiritual self. "Like the fugitive slave narrator, the black spiritual autobiographer traced his or her freedom back to the acquisition of some sort of saving knowledge and to an awakening from within." (*Black American Women's Writing*, p. 17)

When the first Africans were landed as slaves in 1619, the English Church was eager to convert them to Christianity, though the slaves were initially loath to accept the religion of their oppressors. However, this religion offered Africans of disparate tribal origin a common focus. The slaves were quick to embrace a religion that promised liberation—only in a spiritual sense—of personal redemption, and eventual retribution for their oppressors. They were particularly attracted to the Old Testament. In the enslavement of the Hebrews, they found their own story. In the figure of Jesus Christ, they found someone who had suffered as they suffered, someone who understood, and someone who offered them rest from their sufferings. They took what they needed and could use. They fashioned their own kind of Christianity, which they turned to for strength in the constant times of

need. Religion became a purifying force, an occasion to get together to share their pains and a release from the everyday misery.

The first black man to be granted a license to preach was George Leile (b. 1750), a slave in the ownership of a Baptist deacon. In 1794, Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church which has remained separate from the white. The AME afforded the blacks the opportunity to join in worship and to come to enlightenment in their own way. A black woman Jarena Lee (b. 1783), after persistent efforts, became the first black woman to be given permission to preach.

Jarena Lee's sole contribution to literary history is her spiritual autobiography, first published as *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* in 1836 and later revised and expanded as *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* in 1849. In her autobiography Lee outlines her spiritual journey and trials, implicitly revealing the social injustices arising from racism and sexism, and at the same time expressing a strong demand for individual female selfhood through spirituality.

Two other black women spiritual autobiographers of note are Zilpha Elaw (b. 1790) and Julia Foote (b. 1823). Like Jarena Lee, they were also committed to the Christian religion and became preachers. Though the organization of church hierarchy placed constraints on these women as preachers, it nevertheless provided an opportunity for self-definition, as it gave them access to language. Unlike slave narratives, these spiritual autobiographies are couched in formal register,