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THE POETICS OF EXILE IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN EXPLORATION OF UPROOTED IDENTITY IN BLACK POETRY

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ABSTRACT: The enforced removal of individuals has long been a political tool used by African states to create generations of asylum seekers, refugees, and fugitives. Historians often present such political exile as a potentially transformative experience for resilient individuals, but this reading singles the exile out as having an exceptional experience. African Poetry seeks to broaden that understanding within the global political landscape by considering the complexity of the experience of exile and the lasting effects it has had on African peoples. The poets portray exiles from African colonies and nations as active participants within, rather than simply as victims of, the larger global diaspora. In this way, exile is understood as a way of asserting political dissidence and anti-imperial strategies. This paper seeks to explore the inevitable connection between uprootment, exile, and identity disorientation in African Literature.

Keywords: Asylum, Refugees, Fugitives.

Introduction

“When I look into the reflection of the shattered glass upon the floor

I see an image staring back
I do not recognize it anymore
Picking up the sharp pieces
Cutting into my palms
Face-to-face with reality
Of these broken dreams
Spilled across my vanity
Who am I without a King?
Just another broken heart
With a lost identity.” (Griff)

Man has been endowed with cognitive abilities that make him analyze and ponder over his sense of being and existence in the world. Identity Misplaced identities and contemplation over the very idea of self and a sense of identity find a way in various art forms. Exploring one’s identity creates awareness of the elusive self. James D Fearon defines identity as

“...to either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or (a) and (b) at once).” (Fearon Abstract)

Identity has been an integral part of defining one’s sense of worth. Association with a social group or other traits that portray a sense of belongingness direct towards a sense of worth. Philosophers that range from classical philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Augustine to more modern philosophers like Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Freud, Ryle, Bandura, and A, have all proposed various theories on the idea of self. A common feature of all these philosophers is the concept of personal identity, a psychological area of research that deals with the virtue of self-existence and the awareness of their being.

Personal identity stems from ethnic identity and cultural identity where the sense of belongingness inevitably gives birth to a sense of identity – a comfort of being associated and being a part of a group of similar individuals. Simultaneously, ethnic and cultural identity proliferates the notion of personal identity, which is heightened by the foundation that even though an individual is a part of something, yet they are still unique and can be distinguished from the entire group. In metaphorical context, the association between an individual and his sense of identity is often portrayed by ‘roots’. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the root metaphor as – “a fundamental perspective or viewpoint based on a supposition of similarity of form between mental concepts and external objects which though not factually supportable determines how an individual structures his knowledge.” (Merriam-Webster)

The theory of the root metaphor was initially proposed by American philosopher Stephen C. Pepper in his work World Hypotheses (1942). Stephen Pepper defines the root metaphor as "an area of empirical observation which is the point of origin for a world hypothesis" (Pepper 617). It invariably suggests connotations about the core of something. A root metaphor is often used to depict



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DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2023/12.04.90>
www.ijmer.in

the background or the origins of the identity of an individual. In a similar context, the root metaphor, as Earl MacCormac comments, is "the most basic assumption about the nature of the world or experience that we can make when we try to describe it". (MacCormac 93). The root metaphor is an indicator of a topographical identity as well.

Stephen C. Pepper, in his opinion on the root metaphor, provides context that an individual inclined towards comprehending the mechanics of the world forages and inkling an understanding of its origins. The person proposes an area of a ubiquitous chain of concepts and proceeds to compare different fields in comparison to the familiar one. "The original area becomes his basic analogy or root metaphor... If a man is to be creative in the construction of a new world theory, he must dig among the crevices of common sense." (Nordquist)

Karou Yamamoto comments that the root metaphor is the exhaustive, methodological analogy that helps in perceiving the various

"...experiences, interpreting the world and defining the meaning of life...Is the whole universe a perfect machine? Is society an organism? ... Is life a long, arduous journey? Is the present a phase in the fateful karmic cycle? Is social interaction a game? Though mostly implicit, a large set of assumptions stem out of each of such root metaphors to form one's Weltanschauung [world view]" (Nordquist)

Yamamoto states that life is seen as a cathedral to be built and implies that a collective life can be similarly influenced by some commonly held root metaphors, and a whole generation, organization, community, nation, continent, or even world may appear to fall under the spell of the so-called Zeitgeist (the spirit of the age) to reveal certain, particular perspectives, ideas, sentiments, attitudes, or practices. (Nordquist) Alan F. Segal states that the root metaphor usually takes the form of a story about the origins of a group or entity.

To gain perspective, Segal uses the example of a story and the nuances involved in it.

"Although the story may be amusing or enjoyable, it also has four serious functions: to order experience by explaining the beginning of time and history; to inform people about themselves by revealing the continuity between key events in the history of the society and the life of the individual; to illustrate a saving power in human life by demonstrating how to overcome a flaw in society or personal experience, and to provide a moral pattern for individual and community action by both negative and positive example." (Nordquist)

Since the self and identity of an individual form, a kernel to the very idea of being, therefore, the loss of identity can prove lethal for a person. It displaces the very foundation of the existence of an individual. "The painful loss of an irreplaceable and personal identity is a common theme of human existence." (Weigert 1171) Often the loss of the personal identity is associated with a scarring social or cultural loss that brings forth a sense of decrepitation and incompleteness, an orifice that has been forcibly created in an otherwise complete being.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines uprootment as – "to remove as if by pulling up; to pull up by the roots; to displace from a country or traditional habitat." (Merriam-Webster, uproot) Uprootment refers to a social and topographical expulsion from their origin that leads to a loss of identity. The repercussions of a uprootment run deeper than mere loss of identity. For in loss of identity, there is a void that is created that displaces the inner being. However, uprootment is much more severe than that. To uproot means to pull out the very roots. Not only is there a loss of identity but their identities have altogether been damaged. To have forcefully exiled an individual and then thrust upon them a newer culture indicates uprootment and then forceful replanting.

Perhaps, the change in the geographical locations affects the most. Unfamiliar places with unfamiliar faces make the individual feel alienated. Edward Said in his work on exile mentioned how geographical changes play a vital role when it comes to a flux in identity. He comments -

"Along with the language, it is geography — especially in the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia homesickness, belonging, and travel itself — that is the core of my memories of those early years. Each of the places I lived in — Jerusalem, Cairo, Lebanon, the United States — has a complicated, dense web of valences that was very much part of growing up, gaining an identity, and forming my consciousness of myself and others." (Said Prefix-12)

Geographical uprooted results in displaced memories, the core is unable to comprehend such instability. The need for such individuals to call a place home is insatiable.



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“The disorientation of the sense of home, as the ‘out of place or ‘out of line’ effect of unsettling arrivals, involves what is called the migration orientation. The orientation may be described as the lived experience of facing at least two directions; towards a home that has been lost, and to a place that has not yet been home.” (Ahmed 19-20)

Uprootment enforces not only disorientation but also reorientation that is not inherent. The subjugated reorientation leads to faded memories that have no connection with the past roots. The individual has no place to go back, no haven to protect them in times of need. Perhaps that is why the individuals lose hope since they have been forced to believe that they existed in a certain place with no ties to it – as if their creation has been forced upon them. Devoid of the dignity of assimilation, their very being adapts to their dilapidated state, breaking their spirit.

Innumerable works have been written that present the theme of uprootment – implicitly and explicitly. Sui Sin Far in her work *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* writes about the experiences of a woman who had to immigrate to Europe under unfavorable conditions. Edith Maude Eaton under her nom de plume Sui Sin Far divides this collection of short stories into two parts. The first part deals with the experiences of adults while the second part deals with the experiences of children. The novel discusses the lives of Chinese immigrants who move to Europe and how they cope with the new culture. They experience culture shocks one after the other, combat racism, and constantly feel alienated from society.

In one of the opening stories, an American woman behaves rather rudely with Mrs. Spring Fragrance and her husband. To this, Mr. Spring Fragrance replies - “I offer the real Americans my consolations that they should be compelled to do that which is against their principles.” (Eaton 8). In the quote, the neighbor quite strongly implies that a ‘real American’ does not support racism and upholds the values of a democratic citizen. The situation is otherwise different because the apparent sweet neighbor supports the government that intends to ban Chinese immigration.

Yet in another instance from the book, one of the kids mentions how the other is no more a Chinese kid ever since he was adopted by a white couple. “Poor Pat! He Chinese no more; he Chinese no more!” (Eaton 82). The boy Pat has been separated from his biological sister and as he is adopted by the whites, the other children ridicule him over the loss of his identity. His own Chinese identity was uprooted and the White identity is thrust upon him. Not only he, but the entire world points out that once he is adopted by the White, all his Chinese roots would be dismembered and forgotten.

The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You by Dina Nayeri is another example of a novel based on uprootment. *The Ungrateful Refugee* is a novel that is a must-read when it comes to works based on the theme of uprootment. The novel begins as it portrays the protagonist Dina Nayeri reminiscences about her childhood. Being brought up in a war-stricken country, she and her family fled Iran and sought asylum in the United States. Her world was uprooted, and so was her sense of self. Nayeri uses her own experiences as a foundation as she expresses a sense of fraternity between her and other immigrants' stories. She pens the vulnerable experiences that a person faces. Her work focuses on commentary about what it means to unwillingly leave behind their culture and country—and not be welcomed upon their arrival.

The Distance Between Us by Reyna Grande deals with how challenging the circumstances are when people have to cross the border with their families. Just like any typical Latin American family, Grande's story begins with her parents' trek across the border in search of the American Dream and their ordeals with illegal immigration. Catastrophe strikes when her mother returns to their native country to bring her kids back to the U.S. Grande's memoir is both liberating with comical touches and heartbreaking at the same time. The novel flourishes capturing the chaos and oppositions of childhood along with the joys and sorrows of being a young immigrant in search of a place to call it home.

Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa by Rigoberto González is yet another work that deals with the theme of uprootment. The work is a ‘poetic memoir’ and is an amalgamation of multiple themes. It is an elegant narration of a boy who grows up among poor Mexican farmworkers and loses his mother at age 12. It's also a tale of coming into his identity as a queer homosexual man living in a machismo culture before eventually accepting his true self as he combats his loss of self after being abandoned by his father.

The novel *Exit West* by Moshin Hamid blends the horrors of war crimes with a tinge of magical realism. Saeed and Nadia are a young couple forced to flee their unnamed homeland for a saga that takes them from Greece to London to the U.S. Their journey is



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realistic forbearing rather unusual ways of travel. The novel portrays a metaphorical escape through random doors that signify the couple's attempt to escape reality.

A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir by Daisy Hernández captures Hernández vision as she chronicles what her Cuban-Colombian family taught her about love, money, and race while also figuring out what it means to be an American and a woman. Her book is ultimately the story of a daughter who is eager to find herself and find her community while also creating a new, queer life. Moving between English and Spanish, she reflects on the impact of her parents and many of her fears growing up, resulting in a must-read, heartfelt exploration. Her sense of uprootment is manifested as she transitions from her Spanish culture to an American one.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discusses the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze meet and fall in love as teenagers in Lagos, Nigeria. After graduating, though, both set off for independent journeys in different countries. Their experiences as immigrants change them forever and the writer leaves it to the reader's imagination, whether they meet again.

My (Underground) American Dream: My True Story as an Undocumented Immigrant Who Became a Wall Street Executive by Julissa Arce. Arce begins her writing journey with the novel as she pens up her experiences growing up on the outskirts of San Antonio as an undocumented immigrant as she dreamt of professional and financial success. Her honest writing explores the physical, financial, and emotional costs of being a high-achiever while also keeping the secret of her immigration status. Arce paints a picture of the typical undocumented immigrant, the person who could be a next-door neighbor or some family down the street. Though her story is incredible, it's also not uncommon and perhaps that is what makes it an incredible tale.

American Street by Ibi Zoboi is a book about the immigration experience that will appeal to youngsters. This National Book Award finalist is about a girl immigrating to the U.S. from Haiti with her mother. Unfortunately, her mother is detained, leaving Fabiola to explore a new country as she is abandoned to explore on her own.

Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child by Elva Treviño Hart tells the world what it's like to be the child of a family of migrant farm workers, ostensibly detailing the everyday life of a family who struggles in the fields while also having little education and speaking another language. Treviño Hart bares how cultural assimilation is very difficult, and compromises often resulted in consequences that he did not intend. But this story about overcoming your disadvantages and finding yourself is sure to make many feel hopeful.

In the Country, We Love: My Family Divided by Diane Guerrero is written by an author who gained fame for her roles in *Orange Is the New Black* and *Jane the Virgin*, but Guerrero has her own immigration story. When she was fourteen years old, Guerrero's parents were detained and deported while she was at school. As she was left alone in the country as a naturalized US citizen, she had to rely on the kindness of family and friends to survive. *In the Country, We Love* brings to life one extraordinary woman's resilience in the face of a true nightmare but somehow finds the strength to keep going.

Behold the Dreamers by Imbolo Mbue - *Behold the Dreamers* is a modern epic following a Cameroonian couple trying to make it in New York. Their arrival, however, coincides with the Great Recession, making an already hard adjustment even more daunting. *America Is Not the Heart* by Elaine Castillo. *America Is Not the Heart* is set among the Filipino-American community of which Hero is a part. By the time Hero arrives in Los Angeles, she's been through an enormous trek: A wealthy upbringing in the Philippines, a time working for a guerrilla group, and government torture.

Native Speaker by Chang-Rae Lee a work by Henry Park is about a Korean immigrant who spends his life trying to be a native speaker of English; trying to assimilate, essentially, into American culture. Ironically, the more American he becomes, the more alienated he feels from himself. When he agrees to spy on Korean-American politicians, his questions of identity are drawn into sharp relief.

The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail by Óscar Martínez - Journalist Óscar Martínez spent two years traveling the Migrant Trail from Central America to the U.S. border. Martínez's book, *The Beast*, is a thrilling look at the trek and its associated perils: Gang violence, exhaustion, kidnappings, sexual violence, assault, and freight trains. Other works like *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales where Morales writes an autobiographical memoir as she came to the United States in 1994, with not much more than her dreams and her infant son. This gorgeously illustrated picture book is an ode to everything that immigrants bring with them when they arrive in a new country and what they contribute. It is a saga of displacement and uprootment.



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Prayers for the Stolen by Jennifer Clement - Along with the other young women in their remote Mexican mountain village, 15-year-old Ladydi Garcia Martinez disguises herself as a boy to escape the attention of roaming gangs of drug dealers. Inspired by a true story, Prayers for the Stolen is a searing portrait of a matriarchal community, ensnared by the ongoing drug wars and doing what it takes to survive.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong describes the ordeals of Little Dog who is the narrator of this aching book and writes a letter to his mother that she knows she can never read she's illiterate, but she's a central figure in most of the book's scenes. Little Dog describes snapshots of his family's journey from Vietnam to the United States, and his coming of age as a queer man. Vuong is a poet, and his background shows in every glistening sentence in this novel.

Lost Children Archive by Valeria Luiselli. In 2015, Mexican author Valeria Luiselli began volunteering with undocumented refugee children in New York City. She shaped this experimental, moving novel—one of our favorite books of 2019—around the issues she encountered during that life-changing opportunity. Open City by Teju Cole - Like the best travel books, Open City is teeming with spot-on paragraphs of observations. Julius, a doctoral student from Nigeria, walks around New York with wide-open eyes, taking in the sights—and feeling his distance from them.

Became Latina by Raquel Cepeda -Though born in the U.S. to Dominican parents, Cepeda was sent as a baby to live with her maternal grandparents in Santo Domingo. But by the time she comes back to the U.S., her family has changed. Living first with her mother in San Francisco, then with her father in New York City, Cepeda doesn't know how to embrace her identity. Years later, she uses her DNA to discover and delve deeper into her history—along with how her ancestors became Latino in the first place.

Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League by Dan-el Padilla Peralta- This incredible story begins with a young boy living in the U.S. When his parents' visas lapse and Peralta's father returns to Santo Domingo, his courageous mother, stays in NYC to try to make a better life for her sons. But due to life's difficulties, the family eventually becomes homeless. Peralta's account takes us through his story from a homeless shelter to eventually attending Princeton University. This memoir is essential for anyone who not only wants to learn more about the immigration process but also about how it feels to grow up living in two completely different worlds.

American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood by Marie Arana- Arana grows up torn between her father's Peruvian family and her mother's American one. Throughout her story, she tries to make sense of how her family immigrated to the U.S.—and what it means to be a hybrid American. Eventually, she comes to terms with her split identity and embraces the north-south collision of her life and childhood.

Pachinko by Min Jin Lee - Pachinko is a tale of immigration within a different context than stories of coming to the U.S. The multigenerational epic follows a Korean family who moves to Japan in the early 1900s. Their roots in Korea follow them, as they remain in a society that labels them outsiders, and estranged from their country of origin.

Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy by Carlos Eire- One of two memoirs by Eire, he writes of his childhood as a boy uprooted during the Cuban revolution before landing in Kennedy-era Miami. But what does it mean to be a refugee in a strange, new land? Eire faces his new American life with trepidation and excitement, wondering if his Cuban self must "die." His memoir explores both the everyday issues of growing up while also feeling out a completely new world and life.

Black Literature on the other hand locates uprootment and identity issues in each of its texts. It resonates with the pain of forced immigration. The Britannica online encyclopedia defines African American Literature or Black Literature as an offspring of slaved uprootment.

African American literature is the body of literature written by Americans of African descent. Beginning in the pre-Revolutionary War period, African American writers have engaged in a creative, if often contentious, dialogue with American letters. The result is a literature rich in expressive subtlety and social insight, offering illuminating assessments of American identities and history. (Andrews)

Uprootment and identity crises have been recurrent themes in colonial literature. Imperialism led to many daunting activities like slavery and the slave trade. African Americans launched their literature in North America during the second half of the 18th century, joining the war of words between England and its rebellious colonies with a special sense of mission. The earliest African American



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writers sought to demonstrate that the proposition “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence required that Black Americans be extended the same human rights as those claimed by white Americans. Couching a social justice argument in the Christian gospel of the universal brotherhood of humanity, African-born Phillis Wheatley, enslaved in Boston, dedicated her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), the first African American book, to proving that “Negros, Black as Cain,” were not inherently inferior to whites in matters of the spirit and thus could “join the’ angelic train” as spiritual equals to whites.

Composing poems in a wide range of classical genres, Wheatley was determined to show by her mastery of form and meter, as well as by her pious and learned subjects, that a Black poet was as capable of artistic expression as a white poet. *Poems on Various Subjects* provided a powerful argument against the proslavery contention that the failure of African peoples to write serious literature was proof of their intellectual inadequacies and their fitness for enslavement. The poetry and sermons of the Connecticut slave Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806?), though their major theme is the urgency of Christian conversion, buttressed the demand of early African American writers for literary recognition.

In 1789 Olaudah Equiano, Wheatley’s most famous Black literary contemporary published his two-volume autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. A British citizen who had experienced enslavement in the Americas, Equiano has been traditionally regarded, along with Wheatley, as the founder of African literature in English by his having pioneered the slave narrative, a first-hand literary testimony against slavery which, by the early 19th century, earned for African American literature a burgeoning readership in Britain as well as in the United States. One of the most remarkable features of Equiano’s story is his use of African origins to establish his credibility as a critic of European imperialism in Africa. Recent research, however, has raised questions about whether Equiano was born an Igbo (Ibo) in Africa, as he claims in his autobiography. His baptismal record in Westminster, England, lists him on February 9, 1759, as “Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old.”

Scholars have also debated whether Equiano’s account of Igbo life in his autobiography is based on reading rather than memory. In the absence of scholarly consensus on these controversial matters, *The Interesting Narrative* remains a pivotal text in portraying Africa as neither morally benighted nor culturally backward but rather as a model of social harmony defiled by Euro-American greed. In the early 19th century, the standard-bearers of African American literature spoke with heightening the urgency of the need for whites to address the terrible sin of slavery. Through essays, poetry, and fiction as well as more conventional journalism, African American newspapers, inaugurated by *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827, extolled the achievements of Black people worldwide while lobbying persistently for an end to slavery. As the prophet of literary Black nationalism in the United States, David Walker wrote his incendiary *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) to warn white America of impending racial violence if slavery were not abolished.

Echoing Walker, who was a fellow Bostonian, Maria W. Stewart, the first African American woman political writer, issued her *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* in 1835, in which she encouraged Black women in the North to take a more outspoken role in civil rights agitation and Black community building. A year after the publication of Stewart’s *Productions*, Jarena Lee, a domestic servant impelled by a call to preach, published *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, the first spiritual autobiography by an African American woman. (Andrews)

In the wake of the bloody Nat Turner rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, an increasingly fervent antislavery movement in the United States sponsored first-hand autobiographical accounts of slavery by fugitives from the South to make abolitionists of a largely indifferent white Northern readership. From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the fugitive slave narrative dominated the literary landscape of antebellum Black America. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) gained the most attention, establishing Frederick Douglass as the leading African American man of letters of his time.

By predicting his struggle for freedom in his solitary pursuit of literacy, education, and independence, Douglass portrayed himself as a self-made man, which appealed strongly to middle-class white Americans. In his second, revised autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass depicted himself as a product of a slave community on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and explained how his struggles for independence and liberty did not end when he reached the so-called “free states” of the North. Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the first autobiography by a formerly enslaved African American woman, candidly describes her experience of the sexual exploitation that made slavery especially oppressive for Black women. Chronicling what she called “the war” of her life, which ultimately won both her freedom and that of her two children, Jacobs proved the inadequacy of the



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image of the victim that had been applied pervasively to female slaves. Her work and the antislavery and feminist oratory of the New York ex-slave who renamed herself Sojourner Truth enriched early African American literature with unprecedented models of female eloquence and heroism.

Through the slave narrative, African Americans entered the world of prose and dramatic literature. In 1853 William Wells Brown, an internationally known fugitive slave narrator, authored the first Black American novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*. It tells the tragic story of the beautiful light-skinned African American daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress; *Clotel* dies trying to save her daughter from slavery. Five years later Brown also published the first African American play, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, based on scenes and themes familiar to readers of fugitive slave narratives. In the late 1850s Martin R. Delany, a Black journalist, and physician who would later serve as a major in the Union army during the Civil War, wrote *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (serially published in 1859), a novel whose hero plots a slave revolt in the South.

In 1859 the first African American women's fiction appeared: "The Two Offers," a short story by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper dealing with middle-class women whose race is not specified, and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, an autobiographical novel about the life of a working-class Black woman in the North. The *Bondwoman's Narrative* (2002)—a fictionalized slave narrative based on the real-world experiences of its author, Hannah Bond (who published under the pseudonym Hannah Crafts)—was discovered in manuscript in the early 21st century and is among the earliest contributions to African American women's fiction. Harper was renowned in mid-19th-century Black America as the poetic voice of her people, a writer whose verse was direct, impassioned, and poignant. She and James M. Whitfield, author of a volume of spirited protest poetry entitled *America and Other Poems* (1853), helped ensure that the 1850s would become the first African American literary renaissance. Post the fame achieved by the Black poets for the Harlem Renaissance Movement, Black literature has occupied for itself a stage in mainstream literature.

Though almost every Black poet resonates with the theme of uprootment, certain poets locate their sense of identity loss through nature. One such poet is Gabriel Okara. Gabriel Okara, in full Gabriel Imomotimi Gbaingbain Okara, (born April 21, 1921, Bumodi, Nigeria—died March 25, 2019, Yenagoa, Nigeria), Nigerian poet and novelist whose verse had been translated into several languages by the early 1960s. A largely self-educated man, Okara became a bookbinder after leaving school and soon began writing plays and features for radio. In 1953 his poem "The Call of the River Nun" won an award at the Nigerian Festival of Arts. Some of his poems were published in the influential periodical *Black Orpheus*, and by 1960 he was recognized as an accomplished literary craftsman.

Okara's poetry is based on a series of contrasts in which symbols are neatly balanced against each other. The need to reconcile the extremes of experience (life and death are common themes) preoccupies his verse, and a typical poem has a circular movement from everyday reality to a moment of joy and back to reality again.

Okara incorporated African thought, religion, folklore, and imagery into both his verse and prose. His first novel, *The Voice* (1964), is a remarkable linguistic experiment in which Okara translated directly from the Ijo (Ijaw) language, imposing Ijo syntax onto English to give literal expression to African ideas and imagery. The novel creates a symbolic landscape in which the forces of traditional African culture and Western materialism contend. Its tragic hero, Okolo, is both an individual and a universal figure, and the ephemeral "it" that he is searching for could represent any number of transcendent moral values. Okara's skilled portrayal of the inner tensions of his hero distinguished him from many other Nigerian novelists.

During much of the 1960s, Okara worked in civil service. From 1972 to 1980 he was director of the Rivers State Publishing House in Port Harcourt. His later work includes a collection of poems, *The Fisherman's Invocation* (1978), and two books for children, *Little Snake and Little Frog* (1981) and *An Adventure to Juju Island* (1992). (T. E. Britannica)

Langston Hughes, in full James Mercer Langston Hughes, (born February 1, 1902, Joplin, Missouri, U.S.—died May 22, 1967, New York, New York), American writer who was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance and made the African American experience the subject of his writings, which ranged from poetry and plays to novels and newspaper columns. While it was long believed that Hughes was born in 1902, new research released in 2018 indicated that he might have been born the previous year. His parents separated soon after his birth, and he was raised by his mother and grandmother. After his grandmother's death, he and his mother moved to half a dozen cities before reaching Cleveland, where they settled.

He wrote the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" the summer after he graduated from high school in Cleveland; it was published in *The Crisis* in 1921 and brought him considerable attention. After attending Columbia University in New York City from 1921–22, he explored Harlem, forming a permanent attachment to what he called the "great dark city," and worked as a steward on a



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freighter bound for Africa. Back in New York City from seafaring and sojourning in Europe, he met in 1924 the writers Arna Bontemps and Carl Van Vechten, with whom he would have lifelong influential friendships. Hughes won an Opportunity magazine poetry prize in 1925. That same year, Van Vechten introduced Hughes's poetry to the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, who accepted the collection that Knopf would publish as *The Weary Blues* in 1926.

While working as a busboy in a hotel in Washington, D.C., in late 1925, Hughes put three of his poems beside the plate of Vachel Lindsay in the dining room. The next day, newspapers around the country reported that Lindsay, among the most popular white poets of the day, had "discovered" an African American busboy poet, which earned Hughes broader notice. Hughes received a scholarship to and began attending, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in early 1926. That same year, he received the Witter Bynner Undergraduate Poetry Award, and he published "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in *The Nation*, a manifesto in which he called for confident, uniquely Black literature.

A few months after Hughes's graduation, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), his first prose volume had a cordial reception. In the 1930s he turned his poetry more forcefully toward racial justice and political radicalism. He traveled in the American South in 1931 and decried the Scottsboro case; he then traveled widely in the Soviet Union, Haiti, Japan, and elsewhere and served as a newspaper correspondent (1937) during the Spanish Civil War. He published a collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), and became deeply involved in theatre. His play *Mulatto*, adapted from one of his short stories, premiered on Broadway in 1935, and productions of several other plays followed in the late 1930s. He also founded theatre companies in Harlem (1937) and Los Angeles (1939). In 1940 Hughes published *The Big Sea*, his autobiography up to age 28. The second volume of the autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander*, was published in 1956.

Hughes documented African American literature and culture in works such as *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956) and the anthologies *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949) and *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958; with Bontemps). He continued to write numerous works for the stage, including the lyrics for *Street Scene*, an opera with music by Kurt Weill that premiered in 1947. *Black Nativity* (1961; film 2013) is a gospel play that uses Hughes's poetry, along with gospel standards and scriptural passages, to retell the story of the birth of Jesus. It was an international success, and performances of the work—often diverging substantially from the original—became a Christmas tradition in many Black churches and cultural centers. He also wrote poetry until his death; *The Panther and the Lash*, published posthumously in 1967, reflected and engaged with the Black Power movement and, specifically, the Black Panther Party, which was founded the previous year.

Among his other writings, Hughes translated the poetry of Federico García Lorca and Gabriela Mistral. He was also widely known for his comic character Jesse B. Semple, familiarly called Simple, who appeared in Hughes's columns in the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Post* and later in book form and on the stage. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, appeared in 1994. Some of his political exchanges were collected in *Letters from Langston: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Red Scare and Beyond* (2016). (E. o. Britannica)

Claude McKay, (born September 15, 1889, Nairne Castle, Jamaica, British West Indies—died May 22, 1948, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.), Jamaican-born poet and novelist whose *Home to Harlem* (1928) was the most popular novel written by an American black to that time. Before going to the U.S. in 1912, he wrote two volumes of Jamaican dialect verse, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (1912). After attending Tuskegee Institute (1912) and Kansas State Teachers College (1912–14), McKay went to New York in 1914, where he contributed regularly to *The Liberator*, then a leading journal of avant-garde politics and art. The shock of American racism turned him from the conservatism of his youth.

With the publication of two volumes of poetry, *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922), McKay emerged as the first and most militant voice of the Harlem Renaissance. After 1922 McKay lived successively in the Soviet Union, France, Spain, and Morocco. In both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* (1929), he attempted to capture the vitality and essential health of the uprooted black vagabonds of urban America and Europe. There followed a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932), and another novel, *Banana Bottom* (1933). In all these works McKay searched among the common folk for a distinctive black identity.

After returning to America in 1934, McKay was attacked by the communists for repudiating their dogmas and by liberal whites and blacks for his criticism of integrationist-oriented civil rights groups. McKay advocated full civil liberties and racial solidarity. In 1940 he became a U.S. citizen; in 1942 he was converted to Roman Catholicism and worked with a Catholic youth organization until his death. He wrote for various magazines and newspapers, including the *New Leader* and the *New York Amsterdam News*. He also



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wrote an autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937), and a study, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His *Selected Poems* (1953) was issued posthumously. (E. o. Britannica)

Phillis Wheatley, (born c. 1753, present-day Senegal, West Africa—died December 5, 1784, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.), was the first black woman poet of note in the United States. The young girl who was to become Phillis Wheatley was kidnapped and taken to Boston on a slave ship in 1761 and purchased by a tailor, John Wheatley, as a personal servant for his wife, Susanna. She was treated kindly in the Wheatley household, almost as a third child. The Wheatleys soon recognized her talents and gave her privileges unusually for a slave, allowing her to learn to read and write. In less than two years, under the tutelage of Susanna and her daughter, Phillis had mastered English; she went on to learn Greek and Latin and caused a stir among Boston scholars by translating a tale from Ovid. Beginning in her early teens she wrote exceptionally mature, if conventional, verse that was stylistically influenced by Neoclassical poets such as Alexander Pope and was largely concerned with morality, piety, and freedom.

Wheatley's first poem to appear in print was "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin" (1767), but she did not become widely known until the publication of "An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of the Celebrated Divine...George Whitefield" (1770), a tribute to Whitefield, a popular preacher with whom she may have been personally acquainted. The piece is typical of Wheatley's poetic oeuvre both in its formal reliance on couplets and in its genre; more than one-third of her extant works are elegies to prominent figures or friends. A number of her other poems celebrate the nascent United States of America, whose struggle for independence was sometimes employed as a metaphor for spiritual or, more subtly, racial freedom.

Though Wheatley generally avoided the topic of slavery in her poetry, her best-known work, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (written 1768), contains a mild rebuke toward some white readers: "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain / May be refined, and join the angelic train." Other notable poems include "To the University of Cambridge, in New England" (written 1767), "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty" (written 1768), and "On the Death of Rev. Dr. Sewall" (written 1769).

Phillis was escorted by the Wheatleys' son to London in May 1773. Her first book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, where many of her poems first saw print, was published there the same year. Wheatley's personal qualities, even more than her literary talent, contributed to her great social success in London. She returned to Boston in September because of the illness of her mistress. At the desire of friends, she had made in England, she was soon freed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley died shortly thereafter. In 1778 she married John Peters, a free black man who eventually abandoned her. Though she continued writing, fewer than five new poems were published after her marriage. At the end of her life, Wheatley was working as a servant, and she died in poverty. (Encyclopedia)

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DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2023/12.04.90>
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