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## The Discovery of the New Negro

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### ABSTRACT

Colonization, Racial Discrimination and Exploitation- these are the terms associated with the dark history of the Negroes, i.e., African Americans. The century- long struggle came to an end at the dawn of the 20th century, initiated by a movement, namely, the Harlem Renaissance. The movement was more popularly known as the 'New Negro Renaissance', a term coined by Alain Locke in his famous essay. This paper explores the origin and roots of the African Americans, the social injustice and racial discrimination done unto the Blacks, the concentration of the Blacks in Harlem in New York, the causes for the renaissance and the emergence of the New Negro.

**Keywords:** Racism, Colonization, Exploitation, Suppression, Alienation, Assimilation.

The Age of Discovery in the 15th and 16th Century led to a New Era of colonization and cultural exchange with Christopher Columbus discovering America as the 'New World' in 1492. The Europeans, namely, the Portuguese, the Spanish and the English were greedy to amass the enormous wealth by establishing their colonies in America. Thus, Europe reaped enormous profit by exploiting the land and wealth of the American colonies. Despite exploitation of land and wealth, the native population of America was exploited for labour. This resulted in the ruin of American empire, their cultures and the native population who were subjected to back breaking labour and European diseases like Small Pox. The alternative source of labour was

imported from Africa in 1770 This was the beginning of slave trade or Trans Atlantic trade which continued for 300 years until the 20th Century. Thus, the African Negroes, namely, the Blacks, were enslaved by the American Colonists for a period of nearly three centuries. Since then the Blacks were subjected to 'Racial discrimination' and 'subjugation' by the white masters of America.

"Love is our most unifying and empowering common spiritual denominator. The more we ignore its potential to bring greater balance and deeper meaning to human existence, the more likely we are to continue to define history as one long inglorious record of man's inhumanity to man." (Aberjhani 182)

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African-American literature is the bulk of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent and is an integral part of American literature. This branch of literature probes into the question of race, freedom and identity long denied to the blacks in the United States, Slave Narratives is a sub genre of African-American literature where writers give painful accounts of their life of slavery and their journey to freedom.

The history of African-American Literature or Black Literature is largely influenced by the Harlem Renaissance. This great intellectual movement took place during the early decades of the 20th Century between 1918 and 1937. African-American literature dealt with question of identity – crisis, black heritage, racism, slavery, discrimination and equality. The Harlem Renaissance is a multi – faceted upheaval where black writers sought to combat racial prejudice and injustice done unto their race intellectually. Therefore, the Harlem Renaissance has become an integral part of African-American Literary history. Historically, the Harlem Renaissance is a prelude to the Civil Rights movement and the American War of Independence that took place in the later decades of this Century.

“The best of humanity's recorded history is a creative balance between horrors endured and victories achieved and that was during the Harlem Renaissance” (Aberjhani 81)

The Harlem Renaissance sought to reconceptualize ‘The Negro’ and define what is ‘black heritage’ to retaliate the racist beliefs fostered by the whites in America and other European colonizers. African-American culture blossomed during the Harlem Renaissance in fine art forms like literature, music, theatrical and visual arts. In turn, the movement instilled a new racial consciousness and pride among the blacks. It also helped to alter the attitude of the multitudes across the globe towards the story of Black Alienation and assimilation. The black writers acquired a new sense of solidarity as they concentrated themselves in Harlem. Harlem is a district in the New York city which later gained prominence as the symbolic capital of this cultural awakening. The movement was a phase of a larger ‘New Negro Movement’. Harlem a formerly white residential district became a black city in Manhattan.

“Looked inward and expressed what it meant to be black in a white-dominated world and represented what became known as ‘New Negro’” (Baker 872)

Several social factors spurred the Harlem spirit among the blacks, namely the African Americans. The notion that race has become a colonial tool for discriminating the underprivileged became widespread among the blacks who participated in the First World War. The warriors who lived in close quarters at the camp felt the horrors of discrimination and injustice. The great migration of the African – Americans from the rural south to the urban north for employability coupled with an increase in their literacy level led them to have an awakening sense of the Negro Renaissance. Many new National Organizations like NAACP and UNIA were formed to demand for African American civil rights to uplift the race by creating socio-economic avenues. Black exiles and expatriates from Africa and Caribbean influenced one another racially which helped them acquire a new ‘race pride’ and the renaissance gained momentum internationally. The wave of the Harlem Renaissance was propagated amidst the ‘Black’ through magazines like ‘The Crisis’ published by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), ‘Opportunity’ published by the National Urban League, ‘The Messenger’ by the Black Labour Union and ‘Negro World’ published by the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

The Harlem Renaissance was profoundly affected by trends such as Primitivism, Primitive races related themselves more to the natural world and to the elemental human desires. Thus, the intelligentsia of the 20th Century felt that retreating to the primitive culture would provide the key to artistic revolution with authenticity. In the early 20th Century, European artists had drawn inspiration from sub Saharan African cultures. This motivated to look at their own African culture with new eyes and reconnect with this heritage that had been for long ignored or misunderstood. This interest in ‘Black heritage’ fuelled the Negro Movement. This also coincided with the efforts made to define an ‘American Culture’ characterized by ‘ethnic pluralism’ and democratic ethos’. ‘Cultural Pluralism’ was a term coined by Horace Kallen in 1915. This term pertains to the culture of the United States that emerged as a new kind of nation where diverse cultures flourished side by side in harmony. This cultural

pluralist thought was advocated by W.E.B. Dubois in his 'The Souls of Black Folk' which is known to be the defining text of the New Negro Movement. Indeed, the Africa American arts flourished against this fertile cultural pluralist attitude.

Efforts were taken by American intellectuals to distinguish American literature and culture from that of the Europeans. Alongside went the Negro quest for identity, i.e., the African American interest to relate themselves or identify themselves with the American national identity. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson felt that a uniquely American tradition was developed by the African American during this period. The native American culture was dying out due to the negligence of the whites, their tendency to imitate the Europeans and to sacrifice their artistic values for commercial reasons. Meanwhile, the African Americans were in a long struggle, as a race, to identify themselves in this New World. The Centuries long struggle for racial identity and freedom promoted the African Americans to be the prophets of democracy and the defenders of American arts and culture.

To conclude with the words of Baker J. Houston,

“We are living in an era in which billions of people are grappling to promote communication, tolerance and understanding over the more destructive forces of war, terrorism and political chaos that have characterized the beginning of the 21st century .”(10)

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