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HARLEM RENAISSANCE- THE RE-BIRTH OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT-

This paper will focus on how the Harlem Renaissance became a significant movement for African Americans. If today, African Americans are recognized as a source of promoting arts and spreading humanity in the world then I think the Harlem Renaissance was one of the major movements that were responsible for such change. It was the immediate way to articulate about the black community, a spiritual awakening against psychological scars of racism against Afro-Americans by white Americans and energized Afro-American Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, W.E.B. Du Bois imaginatively and socially. Harlem Renaissance conveyed the notion of "ALL ART IS ULTIMATELY SOCIAL". The movement emerged as a voice for black Americans in the field of all forms of visual arts such as dance, music, play, novel, painting, and poetry that represent the visual culture of black Americans. It also exposed the racist exploitation, discrimination, and gave an identity to Afro-Americans. Through, this movement white Americans understood and started recognizing the importance of African-American heritage which was a matter of great pride for Afro-Americans. It inspired black writers to pen down their emotions and feelings on a sheet of paper which till now remains a landmark in the history of Afro-American Literature. African Americans proved to us that it is better to play with words than play with the feelings of people and destroy them completely. Today, they are known for spreading love, humanity, and hope.

KEYWORDS - Harlem Renaissance, Racism, Exploitation, African Americans, Zora Neale Hurston

INTRODUCTION -

Harlem Renaissance or the "New Negro Movement" was an intellectual, artistic, and social movement that took place in Harlem, New York in the year 1920. It was the Zenith of the flowering of African American literature, says James Weldon Johnson. Apart from celebrating African American culture and literature, the Harlem Renaissance also questioned why African American literature was overlooked. Through this movement, black activists were able to protect their civilization. It also expresses the inner struggle of African Americans between their past life and the present life. According to me, what is the importance of a movement if it cannot make a remarkable change for its society and its people especially whose life has been brutally executed by the ruling class people and Harlem Renaissance did its best to provide equal opportunities to the African-American people whose life was worst than a beast? The movement acted like the strongest catalyst which altered the lives of many African-Americans from a nightmare to a beautiful dream because of the following reasons:-

- It provided equal opportunities to African-Americans by eradicating racial differentiation which was created by the white Americans.
- It appreciated the culture, tradition, ethnicity, heritage, language, and talent of every African American.
- It wiped out the memories of slavery, poverty, ignorance, terrorism, and subjugation of African-Americans which was created by the white Americans in their past.

The movement was more of birth than the rebirth because it gave and nurtured the life of many African-Americans. It is important to understand the significance of this movement because it enabled African-Americans to develop and adopt their ideals, morals, and customs through their creativity and art. They could present their artistic works and could enjoy all kinds of liberties and most important could be a part of democracy. Harlem Renaissance included an array of African-American talents which was mainly presented by the literary heritage and visual culture. One such talent was Zora Neale Hurston, an influential member of the Harlem Renaissance and voice of the movement. As a novelist, anthropologist, and folklorist, Hurston is known for her outstanding way of passing her feelings and ideas about racial division and for her efforts to connect both the artistic world and the African-American folks. Through her creativity, meaningful, and highly decorated words she had helped in developing a common identity for her people during an influential time in history. She says:-

“When I was a little girl learning about the Black excellence of our past, I was amazed by their talent, intellect, and resilience. Many were trailblazers with no footsteps to guide them- they created the paths that we walk today.”

PRESERVATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH HARLEM RENAISSANCE -

Zora Neale Hurston was very interested in preserving African heritage and identity through art and music during the Harlem Renaissance. Art during this time reflected the desire to use music to keep African heritage alive. Jacob Lawrence's painting *Jazz* typifies the growing expression of music in African-American communities, especially through jazz. The rhythm and beats of jazz were unique to African-American roots in tribal music and gave them an individual voice. August Christine Savage's bronze cast *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1939), built for the World's Fair, was based on the African American National Anthem, also titled "Lift Every Voice and Sing" written by James Walden Johnson. This sculpture was a physical representation of the song, created to enhance the message and give hope to the black community. The painting *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction* (1934) by Aaron Douglas is part of a series of wall paintings that depict different aspects of black history. This painting is an example of how African-Americans were building a new identity after reconstruction. The painting shows the shift in the place of African-Americans in society from slavery to emancipation. Douglas depicts the emancipated slaves as celebrating their triumph through music and dance. This painting provides an example of how African Americans used music to celebrate their heritage. Together, these paintings exhibit Hurston's desire to keep the African heritage and identity alive through the use of music. William Johnson's painting *Chain Gang* (1939) provides an example of African-American people being bound to the land that they are working on. Because of this dreadful past, African Americans have had a deep relationship with the earth. In the painting *Ascent of Ethiopia* (1932), Lois Mailou Jones expresses the journey of African Americans from slavery to their current struggles. It is meant to represent these trials and their fight to overcome them. In the painting *Soul History* (1969), Romare Bearden shows a group of celebratory African Americans holding their instruments in jubilant song. Bearden is known for creating collages about the black lifestyle and music. All of these pieces provide examples of the strong connections between African Americans and the land. Before the movement took place, White Americans thought Africa was a dark continent, and the people residing over there were born to be enslaved but when the movement Harlem Renaissance took place in the 1920s Africa became universally acknowledged motherland and a source of pride, dignity, and nobility to all African-Americans. They excelled extremely well and were geniuses in every field. Literature and visual culture were such great fields. From the two terms, we could easily guess that they both need skill, emotion, imagination, and technique to call a complete piece of art. The below quote will make the terms clear:-

"When a culture has its inherent laws, originating with its very invention and fusing in one vital unity both with structure and content, then the resulting form may be described as organic. When an organic form is stabilized and repeated as a pattern and the intention of the artist is no longer related to the inherent dynamism of an inventive art but seeks to adapt content to a pre-determined structure, then the resulting form may be described as abstract". (Herbert Read)

Migrating the black body (2017) by Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael Hernandez explores how visual media from painting to photograph, from global independent cinema to Hollywood movies, from posters and broadsides to digital media, from public art to graphic novels has shaped diasporic imaginings of the African Americans. This book explores a new approach to black visibility by recentering the role of visual media in imagining blackness and diaspora individually and collectively. This exceptional collection deftly interrogates the intersection of diasporic blackness and visual culture from the eighteenth century to the present and across a vast transnational landscape, engaging an extraordinary variety of visual texts and methodologies along the way. Another book "Exploring the migratory circuits" through which identities are performed and positioned in visual encounters of many different kinds and deliver rich insights into the multiple meanings of blackness. "Imagining the Black Female Body by Carol E. Henderson is based on the issues of black female identity through the various "imaginings" of the black female body in print and visual culture. This book is thus inherently interdisciplinary in demonstrating how black women have sought to re-imagine their world and reconstitute how the world sees them. It contains the critical dialogue about literary and visual representations of the black female body to connect contemporary representations of black womanhood with a historical legacy of African American women's experiences.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON AS AN IMPORTANT FIGURE IN HARLEM RENAISSANCE MOVEMENT-

Zora Neale Hurston also known as "Queen of the Harlem Renaissance" was one of the influential, significant, and recognized writers in the history of African-American Literature. She was a quintessential member of the Harlem Renaissance, an intellectual, cultural, and artistic movement that started in the year 1920s. Hurston believed that intelligence has nothing to do with color, race, ethnicity and thus she penned down how the African-American society and the idiosyncrasy of an individual's talent matters by breaking the stereotypes. She proves that talent has nothing to do with color rather it is someone's intelligence and thought that makes people superior and inferior. In 1928, Hurston answered her critics in an essay entitled "How it Feels to be Colored Me." In this essay, she wrote:-

" I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul.....I do not belong to that sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal.....No, I do not weep at the world- I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."

In her literary works, she portrays the roller-coaster journey of African-Americans and how they worked hard to achieve their freedom, liberty, and fought for their self- identity. The value and necessity of African-Americans identity and autonomy can be deeply sensed in Hurston's literary works. She made them realized that they were not born for slavery and betrayal they were as important and autonomous creatures as White peoples were. There are mainly the following types of themes in her literary works:-

- Being able to express oneself and having a voice so that you can defend others when you are right.
- Black as a color of pride
- Search for true, unconditional, selfless, and protective love which African-Americans were deprived of
- Quest for self-identity, independence, freedom, and peace.
- Gain an autonomous power.
- Flashbacks, myths, inner monologues, and black dialects.

Marginalization was not something associated only with the psyche of African-Americans long ago in the 18th century Mary Shelley for the first time talks about it in her gothic novel Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus (1818). She used it for the creature which was assumed to be a monster and he too was abandoned of his freedom and rights and he too argues that as a living being, he has the right to happiness which can be easily recognized through his dialogue:-

" Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me."

Marginalization can hurt someone's life causing psychological distress such as anger, depression, anxiety, fear, sadness, frustration, stress, isolation, etc. Making somebody feel so marginalized can be treated based on gender, race, caste, religion, and language. It can be investigated as given below:-

- Thinking someone's privilege should not be enjoyed.
- Assuming someone inferior and insignificant based on race, color, caste, creed, and language.
- Subjugating and domesticating others by keeping them in a powerless position.
- Overlooking, criticizing, interfering with other's cultural, ethical, political, and religious beliefs.

For African-Americans, making them feel so marginalized was not just history it became a bittersweet experience for them because it was only due to the injustice behavior of White Americans they started believing in themselves and recognized their self-worth and potential. For African-Americans, the anxiety of racial traumas and marginalization was a very difficult thing to cope up with. It was a way of making them aware that for centuries, they have been excluded by White Americans and they were aware of the fact that because they felt so miserable and hopeless. That is why Zora Neale Hurston says:-

" Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me".

The process of marginalization and racial traumas began when The Great Migration of Black Migration took place. It was one of the largest mass movements of 6 million African-Americans in the history of the United States of America. For African-Americans, this migration meant forgetting their culture and ethical backgrounds by imposing certain rules which were not their own choices. Thus, slowly and gradually there

were a certain group of people who realized their importance in society and took a giant step to curb certain inconvenient problems and issues and thus they penned down their voices, pain, emotions, feelings, and thoughts. The entry of African-Americans in the world of literature was a good symbol for them because it made them liberated and free.

Thus, we can say that Zora Neale Hurston was a boon for African Americans who raised voice and spread love.

CONCLUSION-

With the above lines, we can say that the Harlem Renaissance was a great boon for African Americans that preserved African American literary heritage, visual culture, and art. It was like a metaphor for them as it symbolizes their brutal past as well as their magnificent present. It examines the complex interplay between racial fears, anxieties, and the political-visual culture of suspicion and terror caused to them by White Americans. Yaacov Agam, therefore says:-

"There are two distinct languages. There is the verbal, which separates people and there is the visual that is understood by everybody".

With an apt remark, I can conclude by giving an apt remark that there is an artist hidden inside each individual and it takes courage to present one's creativity, and hence instead of neglecting them their creativity must be celebrated because "All art is ultimately social". The art of visual culture and literary heritage provides and examines insightful explorations, histories, the documentation of truth, and the status of African American people.

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