



## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE WOMEN WRITERS

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### **Abstract**

African American women writers have remained unnoticed, from what is characterize today as African literature, for the long time. In 1746, a black woman, Lucy Terry, gave birth to African American literature with “Bars Fight”. Other examples of literature written by African American women appeared around 1859, as part of general renaissance of black literature in the 1850s. Since then, African American literature has performed a long journey. A large chunk of female writers emerged during the civil war and with the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance. These writers produced literature in various literary genres with the burning issues of the time which paved the way for the writers’ of the coming generation. This research paper offers a very basic introduction to some of the Afro-American women writers of Harlem Renaissance and their contribution to Afro-American literature which proved very prominent in exercising influence on the writers of upcoming generation. This also highlights the issues of these writers dealt with which are in current discussion of the present time writers of Afro-American literature.

**Keywords:** The Harlem Renaissance, Afro-American Women Writers, Black Literature, Social Issues.

### **Introduction:**

It is a matter of concern that how many literary texts were in afro-American literature in existence before Harlem Renaissance. Lloyd Brown states: "the women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive



anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in this field."(Brown;1981:3). Even the available literary genres before Harlem Renaissance are the least known. But the literature produced during Harlem Renaissance is in good numbers. This is corroborated by James Weldon Johnson in his writing introduction to Sterling Brown's 1932 collection of poetry, *Southern Road*. He states:

The record of negro's efforts in literature goes back a long way, covering a period more than a century and a half, but it is only within the past ten years that America as a whole has been made consciously aware of the Negro as a literary artist. It is only within that brief time that Negro writers have ceased to be regarded as isolate cases of exceptional, perhaps accidental ability, and have gained group recognition. It is only within these few years that the arbiters of American letters have begun to assay the work of these writers by the general literary standards and accord it such appraisal as it might merit.

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement that is by and large considered to have spanned from about 1918 until the mid-1930. In it, African-American music, poetry, and intellectual pursuits came together to form what we now know as The Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, was the zenith of this "flowering of Negro Literature." This decade has witnessed the publication of some vital works by African American women. Their writing possesses certain unique features of theme and presentation.

It is believed that the races of mankind have achieved greatness by writing literature and then developing it. Griggs in this regard writes in his book of philosophical and ethical musings, *Life's Demands*; or, *According to Law*,

"Not a single race that has no literature is classified as great in the eyes of the world..."

Afro-American race of mankind have achieved greatness in that sense as it has a rich tradition of writing literature. Here is the list of some women writers of the Harlem Renaissance times who made their contemporary times to be noted by dealing with the social, political and educational issues of the



their times which are still burning issues in modern times. These women writers handled almost all the literary genres and have provided new dimensions to the literature.

### 1. Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882 – 1961)

Fauset was an American poet, essayist and novelist. Her influence during Harlem Renaissance is great and can't be overstated that she led the development of many key ideas of the Harlem Renaissance. She was the literary editor of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, founded by W. E. B. Du Bois. She studied the teachings and beliefs of W.E.B. Du Bois and applied in her life and also considered Du Bois to be her mentor. Fauset was the first black woman accepted to Phi Beta Kappa, and the first black woman graduate from Cornell. She wrote four novels that include: 'There is Confusion' (1924) which is considered the first Harlem novel, Plum Bun (1928), The Chinaberry Tree (1931), and Comedy, American Style (1933). The Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance ranks her first novel with the work of Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston. Her literary work contains the prevailing social issues like racism (colour mania) and African American identity.

### 2. Nella Larsen (1891 – 1964)

Larsen is deemed as one of the great novelists of the Harlem Renaissance. She became a writer active in Harlem's interracial literary and art community. Larsen published indispensable novels like Quicksand, a largely autobiographical novel which received significant critical acclaim and *Passing*, her second novel which dealt with issues related to two mixed race: African-American women who were childhood companions but had to take different tracks racial identification and marriage. She became the recipient of Guggenheim fellowship.

### 3. Dorothy West (1907 – 1998)

Dorothy west, novelist and short story writer, has been reckoned as the "younger sister" of the Harlem Renaissance and played very instrumental role in the development of its aesthetic perspective. She was the editor and founder of Challenge and New Challenge. "The Living Is Easy" (1948) is her masterpiece novel in which she chronicles the life of a young southern girl in pursuit of the upper class lifestyle. This novel was well received critically but did not sell many copies. In 1982 *The Feminist Press* brought this novel back into print, giving new attention to West and her role in the Harlem Renaissance. This has brought a great change in her life, at the age of 85 West finally



finished her second novel, entitled 'The Wedding'(1995) which portrayed the message that while race may be a false distinction, love knows no bounds. She worked with her contemporaries like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright and others.

#### 4. Marion Vera Cuthbert (1896 – 1989)

She is one of the writers and intellectual associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Her piece of writing is scanty but remarkable. Her major contribution is her doctoral dissertation titled "Education and Marginality: A Study of the Negro College Graduate." It was the sociological study of the effects of education on the lives of African American women. She also wrote and published, for Charles S. Johnson, a volume of poetry, as well as essays in *Opportunity*.

#### 5. Gwendolyn Bennett (1902 – 1981)

Bennett was an African American artist, poet, writer and prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance. According to The Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, many of her poems exalted femininity and, in some cases, natural African beauty." Her heritage is the main theme in her poetry. Her works include the themes like racial pride, rediscovery of Africa, recognition of African music and dance. She was the strong influence on the Harlem Renaissance by giving the African American community racial pride. Through her romantic lyric, she created a romantic vision of being African. She contributed her writings to *Opportunity* which chronicled cultural advancements in Harlem. Her column, The Ebony Flute, was her link to the Harlem cultural and social life. She made her mark in prose and poetry and best known for her short story 'Wedding Day' which was published in the first issue of *Fire*.

#### 6. Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880 – 1966)

Her full name was Georgia Blanche Douglas Camp Johnson and also used pen name, John Temple, for her drama 'Plumes'. She was one of the earliest African American playwrights who wrote more than twenty eight plays and led a salon the Saturday Nighters Club that was instrumental for the Harlem Renaissance drama. Many of her plays were never published because that plays consisted gender and race issues. Only five plays were published: A Sunday Morning in the South (1925), Blue Blood (1926), Plums (1927), Fredrick Douglass (1935), and William and Allen Craft (1935). Her plays have been rediscovered by Gloria Hull.



The plays that she wrote were divided into four sections: "Primitive Life Plays", "Plays of Average Negro Life", "Lynching Plays" and "Radio Plays". Several of her plays were lost.

## **7. Regina Anderson (1901 – 1993)**

Anderson was a multi-racial African American playwright and librarian. She was of Native American, Jewish, East Indian, Swedish, and other European ancestry. Despite her own identification of her race as "American", she was perceived to be African-American by others, and became a key member of the Harlem Renaissance and played key role in it. She, as a librarian, started the "580" or Harlem West Side Literary Salon. She was the first minority to climb the ranks and became a supervising librarian at the New York Public Library (NYPL) and her struggle to break the colour barrier has earned her numerous accolades. Her two volume work on Black New Yorkers remained unpublished. Later she became the vice president of the U.S. Council of Women. Regina allied with W.E.B. Du bois fought for the promotion and equal pay against entrenched sexism and racism.

## **8. Angelina Weld Grimké (1880 – 1958)**

Angelina Grimke was an American journalist, playwright, poet and very prominent figure to the development of the Harlem Renaissance. She was one of the first African American women to have a play publicly performed. Grimke's drama *Rachel* originally titled 'Blessed Are the Barren' is one of the first to protest lynching and racial violence. Through her characters in the play, she expressed different responses to the racial discrimination against blacks at the time. This three act drama was written for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was performed by all black cast and play was well received. The NAACP remarked about this play: "this is the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relating to the lamentable condition of ten millions of colored citizens in this free public"

Grimke handled various literary genres like essays, short stories and poems which were published in *The Crisis*, the newspaper of the NAACP, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois. Her poems were collected in anthologies of the *Harlem Renaissance: The New Negro* which are excellent, image-laden and often deals with themes of lesbian sexuality. Her well known poems includes: 'The Eyes of My Regret', 'At April', 'Trees', and 'The Closing Door'. She had intimate friendship with Georgia Douglas Johnson.



## 9. Zora Neale Hurston (1891 – 1960)

Hurston is widely considered one of the foremost writers of the Harlem Renaissance. She was a folklorist, ethnographer, novelist, short story writer and emblematic figure of the celebration of black culture by the Harlem Renaissance. ( e book 13) Her present reputation and popularity rests on the reprinting of several of her works in the late 1980s, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This book has been read as a feminist manifesto for its unconventional female protagonist, Janie Crawford, who is considered by many critics as a representation of the author herself. She not only wrote about but also lived the quest of twentieth century blacks to pursue beauty, individuality, and affirmation. She has been praised by many critics for using southern black rural dialect in her writings. She has inspired the upcoming generation writers to create non stereotypical black female characters.

## 10. Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson (1875 – 1935)

She was journalist and political activist and one of the formidable poets of the Harlem Renaissance who was involved in the artistic flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance. Her journalism career started in the late 19th century, when it was still unusual for women to work outside of the home, let alone an African-American woman, and the journalism business was a hostile, male-dominated field. Through this career she became a fierce and lifelong advocate for equal rights specifically for women's rights. In 1915, she was field organizer for the Middle Atlantic States for the women's suffrage movement. Her diary was published in 1984 and detailed her life during the years 1921 and 1926 to 1931. It provided useful insights into the lives of black women of the time. Her diary addressed the issues like family, friendship, sexuality, health, professional problems, travels and often financial difficulties.

## 11. May Miller (1899 – 1995)

Miller was an African American poet, playwright and educator. She became the most widely published playwright of Harlem Renaissance and later on turned to imagistic poetry and published seven volume of poetry during her career as a writer. She was a student of Angelina Grimke. Miller entered into the cultural scene of the Harlem Renaissance with her play 'The Bog Guide in 1925' which claimed third place in the play category for Opportunity magazine's Literary Prize Contest. In



her writing, her attempt was to portray black people with a level of respect and dignity that had been absent in drama.

## **12. Effie Lee Newsome (Mary Effie Lee) (1885 – 1979)**

Effie Lee was Harlem Renaissance artist and writer, primarily known as a nature poet and contributors to children's literature. She penned children's poems and about the young black life of her time. She played an instrumental role for the development of black identity, especially among young readers. She also wrote poems for adults, which were included in 'The Poetry of Negro' and her only volume of poetry was 'Gladiola Gardens.' Her job was to teach the black youth of America that to be colored was to be beautiful and about their history as a people and how to turn the anger toward white America into love and compassion. Her writing is replete with these ideas.

## **13. Esther Popel (1896 – 1958)**

Popel was an African American poet of Harlem Renaissance who published poems in *The Crisis* which was the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. She who was concerned much more with politics and participant in Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salon and contributor to *Negro World*, *Opportunity* and other journals of her time. In the early 1920s she was a member of the College Alumnae Club, an organization of college-educated African-American women activists who supported education, especially for African-American girls and then served as a vice-president and president of the club.

## **14. Anne Spencer (1882 – 1975)**

Anne Spencer was a prominent black poet in the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement. She became the first African-American to have her poetry anthologized in the *Norton Anthology of American Poetry*. Her monumental poem is "White Things". She was the believer in equality and equal education for all people. She worked with other renaissance activists such as Langston Hughes, Marian Anderson, George Carver, Martin Luther King Jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois.

## **15. Kathleen Tankersley Young (1903 – 1933)**

Kathleen was an African American poet and editor associated with Harlem Renaissance. It is considered that she lived very short life of thirty years hence her name appears like a cipher through little magazines of the late 1920's and early 1930's and in anthologies of Harlem Renaissance and



American Women's Poetry. She was friends with Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. She co-founded *Blues* magazine and edited Modern Editions Press.

## 16. Eulalie Spence (1894 – 1981)

Spence was a black writer, playwright, director and actress from the British West Indies and influential member of Harlem Renaissance. She wrote fourteen plays, five of which were published. She described herself as a folk-dramatist and made plays for fun and entertainment. She is known to the world for her feud with W. E. B. Du Bois. She received more recognition than other black playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance time, winning various competitions.

### **Conclusion:**

Women writers of Harlem Renaissance used literature as a tool to voice the injustices they experienced and observed. They attempted to push for an end of segregation confronted the issue of racism and helped to shape a sense of pride and independence in the African American community.

Other issues which were dealt with are of equality, education, gender, sexism, family, friendship, health, professional problems, and financial difficulties to women. The stereotyped image of black women was to wipe out was their purpose. They have shown the good effects of education on black people and particularly black girls and women. Gender disparity was repudiated and sexism was negated in the writings and financial difficulties of women were highlighted and suggested to overcome them. These writers, no doubt, paved the way for the writers of upcoming generation who deal with these issues with great depth.

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