

## Comparative Examination of Motifs and the Representation of Identities in Selected Works of Kamau Brathwaite and Helene Johnson

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to consider the deployment of literary motifs to discuss the representation of identities in the selected works of Kamau Brathwaite and Helene Johnson. The analysis was informed by the need to identify the adherence to the preponderant theme of the quest for identity and the representation of identities in American Literary tradition. This study critically appraised and analyzed the development of the African-American and Caribbean literary traditions within the conscious space of displacement and identity renegotiation. The study revealed that the selected and critically pieces of the writers amplify the similarity or uniformity in the sociohistorical experiences of displacement from the root, search for identity and reinstatement of lost values in the enabling milieus of the writers.

### 1. Introduction

The literature of the black Diaspora which can also be regarded as a literature of slave ancestry draws a considerable wealth of influence from the historical, economic and cultural history of the black Diaspora (Chassot 2018). Scholars have sought to establish the functional essence of this distinctive literary tradition through divergent yardsticks. They include:

- i. African-American literary tradition
- ii. Caribbean literary tradition

These traditions are cogent in the discourse of the evolution of black Diaspora literary indoctrination and configuration as they, though etymologically divergent, share a unique convergence in their portrayal of the black Diaspora experience.

#### 1.1. The African-American Literary tradition

The historical development of the African-American literary tradition is premised on reactionary agitations against the subjugation of the blacks in the American South. The development of this tradition, which was rapid information and construction, was granted impetus by writers who were predominantly resident in the North. The essence of literature of this tradition was woven around what Kenneth W. Warren (2010) captures as a:

Cultural accommodation to segregation, which writers of African American literature, most of whom were located in the North used to speak on behalf of the race, most of which was still located in the south. (740)

Anthropological records and scholarly interventions have all pointed out the fact that African American literary as it were, cannot be holistically appraised without a mention of the poetry and oral and slave narratives. These literary ventures were media through which enslaved Africans expressed their disgruntlement with the subversive slavery operation. Thus, the import of the oral epoch of oral and slave narratives in the formulation of the African American literary tradition cannot be overemphasised. The deep

rootedness of the tradition was aided by the poetic dexterity of this early era. As a result, this era paved the way for the vistas of creative productions churned out from this literary tradition.

Amy Sickels (2010) emphasized this claim when he asserts that;

Poetry and oral slave narratives recorded voices of struggle and triumph and gave rise to the rich and diverse array of writing that has characterised the twentieth century and beyond. (8)

The abolition of slavery changed the focalisation of literary outputs churned out in the African- American literary tradition. Other areas of the African American experience were ventured into. Representative writings from the likes of Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Ernest Gaines to mention but a few, were crucial in the discourse of the quest for African-American assertiveness of self in the society.

Writings from writers like W.E.B Du Bois, Booker T Washington, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Junior, Marcus Garvey, and Lawrence Dunbar were also significant in the African-American experience. These writers sought a reconciliation of the socio-historical records and identity formation bid. The struggles for self-affirmation and racial reconfiguration have been kernel to the construct of the writings of African-American writers.

However, from the concise introduction, which is in no way representative of the holistic development of the literary tradition in Africa-America, the backbencher role the chauvinistic African American society awarded females in the early part of this tradition is vivid. This feminine creative paucity was nipped in the bud by writers like Loraine Hansberry Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Zora Nearle Hurston and Terri McMillan (Graham and Ward 2011).

### **1.2. The development of Caribbean literary tradition**

Caribbean literature is a product of post-colonialism, and a phenomenon that came into existence after European imperialism (Shalini 2004). Thus, Caribbean literature can be said to be an embodiment of the plight of a displaced people. Most of these displaced people were individuals of African ancestry, who lost their connection to their roots.

The displacement of these people, most of the African ancestry, was rampant during the period of colonialism. It was a period, which the development of the agricultural sector was seen as the best alternative for economic development. By implication, Europeans sought out Africans for enforced labour in sugarcane plantations. There was a massive influx of Africans to the new world to fulfil this sinister objective. This period was referred to as the period of triangular trade.

However, after the independence proclamation, the real experience of the fragmented Caribbean Island was emphasized through the three genres of literature. These writers sought to establish the essence of the Caribbean cultural configuration. They espoused; spiritual relevance, political entity and the essence of musical elements to discuss various thematic preoccupations.

According to Julia Udofia (2013), the events that shaped the thematic preoccupation of this tradition included:

- i. Slavery in the Caribbean.
- ii. Abolition of slavery.
- iii. Post-emancipation Caribbean (57&58).

In reconstructing the fast-eroding cultural values, the Caribbean writer is saddled with the responsibility of showcasing the effect of the plantation and colonialism experiences on the social and psychological frame of the Caribbean populace. The uniqueness of this tradition spurs from the concentration of the writers on social awareness. This position maintained in the Caribbean literary tradition can be said to be enabled by the historical experience of the Caribbean people.

Consequently, the literature of the Caribbean society is one that can be averred to have passed through stages of apparent silence to assimilation, imitation, and apology, and on to innovation, affirmation, and transformation. (Dance 1986:1)

### **1.3. Establishing the Nexus between the Literary Traditions**

A critical consideration of the Caribbean and African American literary traditions relates to the level of inter-relatedness that manifests in the ideologies of the two traditions. This consideration is mainly buttressed by the ambience professed by the two traditions. Apart from this, scholarly understudy and understanding of the Caribbean literary tradition and the African American literary tradition exposes the inextricable link between the traditions. This link is more often than not buttressed by the thematic preoccupations and the pretext that guides the formulation or construct of the traditions.

Moreover, the African-American tradition and the Caribbean literary tradition emphasize the quest for identity reclamation, the quest for the essence of being and cultural reconfiguration. Through the employment of tropes and thematic dexterity; novelists,

playwrights as well as poets from the two traditions explore the existential anomalies through their character invention, literary configuration and literary devices. Furthermore, themes of the continual rejection of institutionalized vices and the assertion of self are predominantly considered in the literature of the literary traditions.

However, it is cogent to note at this juncture that the transcendental nature of the two traditions makes it an apparent disservice to aver that the aforementioned are the only underlining factors that guide the construction of the literary productions of the two traditions. Thus, it would be misconstrued to pigeonhole African American and Caribbean literature to the essence of cultural reconfiguration and identity reclamation.

## 2.0 Scope of the Study

Scholarly interventions into the study of the two traditions under the auspices of the literature of the black Diaspora indicate that there is a peculiar unflinching dedication of efforts by writers into transcending this thematic blueprint. They espouse other realities and by so doing, discredit the reductive and minimalist tendencies that betide the literary traditions.

*The recognition of themes and subjects found in African American (and black Diaspora literature by extension) have expanded widely and today more than ever, it is nearly impossible to group the works of writers under one single heading. (2010:15)*

Evidently, literary documentations by Colson Whitehead (through, *The Institutionist*) and Randall Kenan (through, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*) explore other arrays of readings that African American literature can be subjected to. Earl Lovelace (through, *The Schoolmaster*) also explores other plausible ways from which Caribbean literary documentation can be read and analyzed.

The study however restricts the focus of the critical analysis and examination of the African American and the Caribbean literary traditions to the creative and literary productions of Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Helene Johnson. The selection of the two representatives of the Caribbean and African American literary traditions was informed by the need to consider the extent to which these writers depict the agitations of cultural reconfiguration and identity reclamation in their respective milieu.

## 3.0 Aim of the Study

It is the aim of this critical interpretation of the works of Helene Johnson and Edward Kamau Brathwaite to vividly portray the quest for identity and representation of motifs, themes and literary devices which reflects and refracts the socio-historical, socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political configuration of the multiethnic and multiracial black Diaspora. Through a peculiar emphasis on the motifs, tropes and representation of identities in the works of the selected writers, this critical examination hopes to be revelatory, by divulging information on the extent to which these writers have been able to adhere to the underlying sociological consciousness which guides the construct of the two literary traditions.

## 4.0 Literary Biography

### 4.1 Biography of Helene Johnson

Helene Johnson's contributions to the African American literary tradition position her artistry as one to be reckoned with. Her creative and innovative development or recreation of the trepidation and subjugation wrought on the African American psyche in the South which is vividly portrayed through the recurring and underlying motifs of African American literature makes her poetic outputs worthy of critical explications within the ambits of African-American literary tradition and, by extension, black diaspora literature.

Noteworthy is Helene Johnson's pivotal role in the construct of the New Negro Renaissance, a move in which African-Americans started to redefine the essence of their being in Harlem. Prior to this psychological renaissance, African-Americans had been exposed to different shades of racial segregation, violence and discrimination. Jarret comments:

*During the period of the First World War (1914-1918), there was a massive migration of African Americans from the South (where the institutionalised system of racial segregation held sway) to create Harlem. Harlem, which before this period was a Jewish neighbourhood, became a focal point of the New Negro Movement. (Jarrett 2014:45)*

Apart from the psychological trauma the nefarious system of racial segregation wrought on Helene Johnson and African Americans as a community, the tumultuous life experiences of Helene are significant. However, these experiences which include: having to grow up without paternal care and being afflicted with osteoporosis, did not deter her. Johnson's penchant for creative writing developed rapidly with the help of her supportive mother. Thus, as a young child in Boston Massachusetts, her achievement through the Evening Quill Club set her up for the recognition she achieved before her death in 1995. One of the recognitions that

flooded Johnson's artistry is the remarkable inclusion of her work in two of the influential New Negro Renaissance magazines: the National Association for the achievement of coloured people's *The Crisis* and the urban league's *Opportunity*. (190)

Even as a Boston University dropout, she was able to publish beautiful distinctive poetic works, one of which is renowned, *Bottled* published in 1927. A poem that reflects and lampoons the obnoxious realities of oppression and racism and the stereotypical models of the chauvinistic popular culture.

#### **4.2 Biography of Edward Kamau Brathwaite**

Edward Kamau Brathwaite's writing career launched him into a significant place in the Caribbean literary tradition. His distinct approach to the documentation of the Caribbean cultural reconfiguration and identity reclamation motif is a topical idea in his creative outputs. Born in Bridgetown, Barbados in 1930, his craving for creative writing was set in motion in his heydays. He used the creative ingenuity platform offered him by Harrison College judiciously as his thrust into creative documentation is set in motion.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite has been the focal point of many scholarly appraisals because of his distinctive brand of writing as well as poetic dexterity, a peculiarity, which brings to bare the sensibilities espoused in the literature of the black Diaspora.

### **5.0 Exploring Motifs, Tropes and Representation of Identities in the Caribbean literary tradition.**

#### **5.1 Exile and Negation**

Exile is an underlying factor in the construct of Caribbean literature. It is an accentuated motif in the writings of the Caribbean. It defines the fugitive nature of the Caribbean person as well as the racial heritage of colonialism in the Caribbean world. Thus, the pains and pleasures of exile conditions - the interminable pilgrimage of the Caribbean person is prioritized by writers in this tradition. This commitment according to Frantz Fanon (1982) is a means of:

(Allaying) the immobility to which the native is condemned. It can only be called into question if the natives (especially the writers) decides to put an end to the history of colonization- the history of pillage- and to bring into existence, the history of the nation- the history of decolonization. (40)

Consequently, the West Indian writer as a vanguard of the society is saddled with the responsibility of engaging and exposing the anomalies in the society. A stance Fuentes regards as 'a daily revolution'. A revolution which he hopes can help the Caribbean renaissance or rejuvenation. The tropes of exile that pervade Caribbean writings can be grouped into two distinct forms. They are:

##### **i. Cultural Displacement from roots**

Exile and negation is a motif that has a preponderant impact on the Caribbean people and is subsequently reflected in the writings of the Caribbean writers. The withdrawal and displacement of people from their culture lead to the exilic reality that the people are exposed to. The instances of cultural diffusion and subversion are not farfetched in the Caribbean Island. Because people have to blend both African and European ways of life in the cultural melting-pot they find themselves in, the imminent eventuality of cultural crisis is inevitable

##### **ii. Social and Psychological displacement from roots**

The recourse of people to vices due to psychological anomalies rears its head in the socialization processes of the Caribbean people. The despicable level of financial and economical impoverishment are major factors that expose the people to less admirable means to sail through the hurdles of existence.

#### **5.2 Quest for identity**

The quest for identity is in line with the persistent psychological journey for the essence of being or existence in the Caribbean milieu. This reality of the search for identity depicts that the Caribbean man cannot identify his roots as he finds himself in a dilemma of being. Thus, he persistently seeks the answer to the question: Who am I?

#### **5.3 Cultural Syncretism**

In a bid to reconstruct and reconfigure a seemingly maligned society, Caribbean writers adopt means to reassert the pristine nature of the Caribbean individual hitherto the wrecking of havoc by the twin-engine of colonialism and slavery. Even in the face of the multiracial and multiethnic reality, media that indicate a succinct level of discontent with the status quo and the need to reconfigure it are used in the tradition.

This recurring indoctrination is lent credence by the subversive patterns of the Rastafarians and the adherents of the calypso tradition. Although some critics have expressed the substrate nature of these traditions, however, the impact of these creative patterns cannot be overemphasized.

Another style Caribbean writers deploy in their writings is the creative use of language which enhances the cultural and identity reconfiguration indoctrination. They use elements of the indigenous oral aesthetics which includes; the creole and the patois. The utilization of Standard French or Standard English, which are dominant mainstream languages in the West Indies, can sufficiently capture and portray the Caribbean identity which writers want to emphasize. This is due to clouds of colonialism and oppression that are subdued in the standard codes.

#### 5.4 Africa

The recourse to themes and symbols which herald the sensibility of the African psyche is common in the literary works of Caribbean literary writers. Evidently, the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which had Africa as a focal trading area, is often espoused in the literary writings of Caribbean writers. The functional nature of Caribbean literature, which emphasizes the historical and cultural standpoint of the Caribbean milieu, is considerably buttressed through this.

(Omotosho 1982) lends significant credence to this claim, when he captures the despondent level the Caribbean mind is reduced to. He opines that:

They (the Caribbean minds) have been violently taken away from their ancestral homes through a conspiracy of their own people and the white slavers and thus been permanently deprived of the revitalizing effect of their home culture, something which the Europeans of the Caribbean depended upon to survive their sojourns and the Indians looked back to in exile .... (30)

He advances his position further by identifying the aftermath of this coerced action on the psyche of the Caribbean mindset. He recognizes the levels of denigration wrought by this under-developing tendency of the Europeans on the Africans. He discussed them under the following auspices:

- i. The relegation of the essence of African cultural norms and values to the background.
- ii. The status of cultural sterility imminently springs up as a result of jettisoning the aesthetics of the African culture.

In conclusion, it would not be misconstrued to assert that the aforementioned tropes have contributed immensely to the thematic structuring of Caribbean literary tradition. Consequently, these tropes enhance the development of salient issues like flight, fear, alienation, racism and political inequalities.

It is in line with the aforementioned tropes and salient issues that (Oloruntoba-Oju 1994) posits that the literary tradition in the West Indies is mainly premised on the quest for holistic renaissance and identity reclamation. (139)

#### 6.0 Analysis of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's works

This critical analysis of Edward Kamau Brathwaite writings seeks to identify his adherence to the Caribbean literary blueprint in his literary works. Adequate consideration will be given to his judicious use of thematic structure, literary devices and stylistic ingenuity to advance his literary focus.

*The Arrivants* is evidence of Brathwaite's presentation of the Caribbean socio-political and socio-cultural development in the multiethnic and multiracial Caribbean milieu. A renowned trilogy comprising *Right of Passage*, *Island* and *Mask* represents Brathwaite's presentation of the chronological evolution of the Caribbean society. This is buttressed in Kehinde (2007) when he expressed the fact that:

Brathwaite portrays the plight of the black man in three stages in his 'trilogy' (The Arrivants- "Rights of Passage", "Islands" and "Masks") - the identification of Africa as his roots, the celebration of the realities of African heritage and the reconciliation with the alienation. (187)

The second trilogy which equally portrays Brathwaite's creative ingenuity includes: *Sun Poem*, *Mother Poem* and *Ex/self*.

His insightful account captures the reality of the Caribbean mindset which is subjected to go through the quest for identity, in order to transcend the myriads of his rootless and nameless nature. However, Brathwaite was quick to vilify the black man for willingly allowing the event that shaped his history. At such Brathwaite takes no prisoners when he acknowledges the nefarious deeds of the black man which gave impetus to the eventualities that shaped his history forever. He expresses this through the lines of "The Journeys" (*Right of Passage*)

*He needs no clowning  
To assert himself: no boot  
Black smile, no warm humility:  
No hanging*

*One-hand from his strength, playing  
The black baboon*

*Track him down and lead him  
To himself, the minotaur.*

Brathwaite's vilification results in his presentation of the aftermath of the betrayal. He accentuates this claim by presenting the situation of the black man as being that of dispersion.

*Ever seen  
A man  
Travel more  
Seen more  
Lands  
Than this poor  
Land  
Less, harbour  
Less spade?*

Brathwaite's identification of the black man's trepidation and servitude pervade his poetic assertions. He vividly depicts this stance in *Postitude/Home* (Rights of Passage) where he states his unreserved purgation of the emotion of pity for his existence.

*Where then is the nigger's  
Home?  
In Paris Brixton Kingston  
Rome?  
Here?  
Or in Heaven?  
What crime  
His dark  
Dividing  
Skin is hiding?  
Will exile never/end?*

In *The Emigrants*, the poet probes the state of the black man due to displacement from home. He achieves a succinct metaphorical and imaging of identity crisis and cultural disillusionment when he recounts the acrid reservation of the protagonist in the poem.

*Our colour heats a restless drum  
But only the bitter come*

Consequently, the poet calls for a return home. He does not understate the fact that his unflinching desire is to retrace his roots. This umbilical bonding with home is given considerable credence in the lines of *Wings of Dove*;

*And I  
Rastafar-I  
In Babylon's boom  
Town, crazed by the moon  
And the peace of this calice, I  
Prophet and singer, scourge  
Of the gutter, guardian  
Trench Town, the Dungle and Young's  
Town, rise and walk through the now silent*

*Street's of affliction, hawk 's eyes  
 Hard with fear, with  
 Affection, and hear my people  
 Cry, my people  
 Shout:  
 Down down  
 White  
 Man....*

The poet also probes further into the Caribbean quest for survival in a terrible landscape in order to reclaim his identity, by reeling metaphorical details of the adventure or journey of the Caribbean mind. Consequently, he affirms the Caribbean will survive through the re-presentation of the sea which aided the transatlantic disillusion voyage out of the homeland. Brathwaite portrays the elation at the discovery of the hope of reclaiming identity.

*But today I would join you, travelling river  
 Borne down the years of your patientest flowing;  
 Past plains that would wreck us, sorrows arrest us;  
 Hatred that washes us up on the flats and moving  
 On through the plains that conceive us.  
 Processioned in tumult come to the sea.*

Evidently, in the penultimate and last line of the stanza above, Brathwaite is seen issuing a rallying call to the Caribbean to start the journey to cultural reconfiguration and identity reclamation by jettisoning the difficult living experiences in the alien country they have found themselves. He calls for the need for displaced Africans to stop hiding in the castles of their skins and seek holistic liberation from their idealistic existence.

Furthermore, Brathwaite endeavours to call for mild actions against the status quo through his churchly tone. The tone stands disparately with the enraged poetic tone in the Caribbean. However, the mild or liberal tone which Brathwaite adopts in his works does not in any way undermine the dissatisfaction with the turn of events. He assumes a double-voiced and other times, rhetorical tone, the stance on the portrayal of the indeterminate construct of the Caribbean soul is considerably buttressed in his poetry.

*These my children?  
 God, you hear them?  
 What deep sun  
 What shattered glory?  
 What harsh logic  
 Guides their story  
 When release  
 From further journey?*

Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poetry indicates impeccable documentation of the Caribbean sociopolitical and sociocultural history. What is more, the commendable presentation of the Caribbean experience in Brathwaite poetry focuses on the symbolic emancipation of the Caribbean self through the juxtaposition of the alienated Caribbean self and the Caribbean mind who eventually achieves epiphany.

A critical consideration of Brathwaite's poetry indicates a strident disposition towards the existence of the black man in the Caribbean. Consequently, the thematic preoccupations of his works vividly portray his aversion towards the conditions against black Caribbean self-emancipation.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite's literary deftness is often seen in his judicious use of literary devices which in turn showcase his thematic indoctrination. He creatively and uniquely adopts and adapts these devices to reflect and refract the situation of the black man in the Caribbean. Rhetorical questioning is one of the endearing devices evidently and consciously employed in Brathwaite's poetry. He uses this device as a tool of emphasizing the theme of the renaissance and the need for psychological reconstruction of the Caribbean psyche in the face of subjugation.

Another characteristic of Brathwaite's poetry is found in his distinctive use of enjambments or run-on lines. The essence of this is to articulate the trope of the journey in the Caribbean mindset. The poet foregrounds the inability of the Caribbean psyche to

discover epiphany in his existential existence in the Caribbean. Thus, the Caribbean psyche is configured in such a way that he continues to run against his own shadows.

Brathwaite exhibits the invocation of the pristine black ritual ontology to display his bond to his roots and foreground the restoration of the Caribbean mind as being only achievable if he is able to engage in a psychological, traditional and cultural renaissance of self.

### **7.0 Exploring the Motifs, Tropes and Representation of Identities in the African American Literary Tradition**

The essence of the African-American literary tradition since its inception is to serve as a mirror from which the reflections of the African American sociological concerns and experiences can be seen. With this submission, it would not be misconstruing facts to aver that the representation of thematic preoccupations, motifs and the imminent manifestation of tropes in African-American literature has maintained an inextricable relationship with the socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic lives of the African-American. The reactionary stance of writers in acknowledging the disillusioned state of the African American in the African American society stems from the renowned declaration of W.E.B Du Bois quoted in Kevin Ramsden (2002):

*We are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer battle against the forces in our own land. (516)*

From the era of depression to the populist agrarian agitations of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the recurring denominator in the African American existence is predominantly on migration. Migration or journey holds a significant place in the construct of African American writings. Thus, a comprehensive study of African American society and the development of the African literary tradition cannot be holistically discussed without a mention of the era of migration and journeying which started during the transatlantic slave trade. A period when Africans were displaced from different countries and taken to Europe and the Americas for forced labour as menial workers and plantation labourers.

Shortly after this period, the events in the south which brought to fore the level of bestial tendencies in man, through lynching, disenfranchisement, Peonage and injustice of all sorts, conditioned another form of migration. This migration or journey witnessed the exponential movement of black African Americans to fulfil their economic agitations of breaking even in a strident social structure to fulfil this admiration, they saw the fast-developing industrialization in the North as the best option.

It is on these two milestone events in African American life that African American writers premised their discussions on.

The underpinning of different shades of racism in African American society is another factor that African American writers establish in their writings. The subversion of the essence of being is not restricted to the black and white population alone, it transcends to the trepidation meted out on the African American white on the black African-American. This discovery no doubt guides the construct of African-American writings.

The persistent search for the essence of being and living is another factor expressively employed in the writings of African American writers. Be it; prosaic, poetic, dramatic enactment, essays or speech presentation, the exposition into the African-American quest for self and being is amplified. The African American mind, as a result of his displacement from his real identity, is conditioned to persistently try to locate self or find for self a position in existence. As a result of the plausibility of the notion of identity quest in the African American existence, African American writers through their character invention and literary devices emphasis this recurrent norm in African American life.

The constant nostalgic expression and vivid bonding with ancestral roots is another avenue used by writers as a means of foregrounding the sensibility of the African-American psyche. The psyche is portrayed as one which is eternally connected with the umbilical cords of his ancestral home Africa. They relate their unapologetic resolve to achieve epiphany through homecoming. What is more, they also use this unique motif of Africa, through copious symbols which depicts African fauna and flora to indicate their perpetual bonding to their ancestral home even though the displacement has physically taken them away from their roots.

The reality in the African American milieu is one that conditions a diffusion of cultural norms and ideologies. The transatlantic slave trading gave impetus to the development of cultural and traditional admixtures. As a result of this admixture, the African American milieu faces the reality of cultural syncretism. Consequently, there are frequent external influences against the cultures of African American society.

A copious interplay of cultural syncretism is found in the development which saw the incorporation of the aesthetic of jazz music in the writings of African-Americans.

### **8.0 Analysis of Helene Johnson's works**



Helene Johnson's contribution to the African-American tradition during the Harlem renaissance positions her in the crux of African-American writers. Helene Johnson although literarily short-lived, was able to add her quota to the literary tradition. Her grasp of the modalities which guide the existence of the African-Americans in their bid to live is expressed through her poetic documentations. Her poem *Race* is a poem that succinctly captures the poet's unapologetic and unflinching admiration of her race. Her unabated pride of being affiliated with the black race is vivid in

Ah, my race,  
Wonder race,  
Sobbing with song  
Ah, my race,  
Laughing race...

Johnson recognizes sinister events of slavery and racial subversion that distorted the future of her race by relaying her admiration for her unique race through imageries. Consequently, this poem resonates and reiterates the essence of the Harlem renaissance. The Harlem renaissance advocates a rejuvenation of the African-American psyche in order to reconfigure identity. The creative use of situational irony is replete this poem.

Furthermore, Johnson's preponderant emphasis on 'race' in the poem indicates her recognition of the existing differences between racial entities in African-American society. Overtly, "Race" contributes immensely to the thesis of Helen Johnson's poetic oeuvre as she showcases her dedication to the cause of racial emancipation in her writings.

In the same vein, *Magula*, which is a narrative poem that identifies with the plight of the African-Americans in the face of their displacement and the loss of self. The exploiter, "a man with white-collar" endeavours to assert his desires on a man who is not able to even discern his mischief. Johnson's portrayal of the ills of identity crisis is sufficiently buttressed in this poem.

*A nebulous being on a sun-scorched rock.  
In such a place,  
In this pulsing, riotous gasp of color,  
I met Magula, dark as a tree at night,....*

Worthy of note in this poem is Johnson's creative departure from the societal norm through a reversal of roles in his characterization of the poetic persona in the poem. The characterization of the poetic persona in this poem justifies the rejuvenation of perception that the Harlem Renaissance was all about. Johnson's reverses the role of anonymity which was a norm in the characterisation of the life of the African American by creating an identity called *Magula* while the white man is presented as anonymous.

*I met Magula, dark as a tree at night,  
Eager-lipped, listening to a man with a white-collar...*

This technique is also creatively used by Alice Walker in her narrative in *The Colour Purple*. However, the context relatively differs; Alice Walker uses this technique to malign the subjugation of the women folk by the black American men folk.

### 8.1 Johnson's Thematic Focus

The thematic undertones in Helene Johnson's poetic writings are in consonance with the thematic structuring of the writings churned out during the Harlem renaissance. This renaissance which was made up literary writers who constantly criticise the state of inactions which the African American especially the blacks assume towards their plights. It is a movement that emphasised the need for the African American to stand up and be counted in the politics that guides his existence and being.

Consequently, the Harlem Renaissance perspective on issues pertaining to the rejuvenation of the black American psyche is discussed in the writings of Helene Johnson.

Helene Johnson's anger against the superstructure of White domination of the blacks in America is vivid in her poem *Mulaga*. No doubt, the revelatory poem constructed in a narrative pattern reveals the hypocritical nature of the whites who elect to use all sorts of pranks to persistently subjugate the black. A noticeable metaphor which the poetic persona who represents the white race in the poem is the use of religion as a veil to conceal his sinister intentions. Johnson calls for the need for the black African-American to see the hypocritical intent of the whites.

*My Race* explains the despicable recourse to non-dignifying labour by the blacks as a means of transcending their economic woes. Johnson traces the migration of African-Americans from the South to the North in search of 'greener pastures. Evidently, the greener pasture they sought was a new form of slavery and this adds considerably to the disillusionment of the African Americans. They are always striving to break even but constantly frustrated by the superstructure of psychological trepidation and economic subjugation. Helen Johnson's literary span was a relatively short one, it would be myopic to discuss the essence of her productivity without recourse to her literary dexterity. Her poetic contributions during the Harlem renaissance, are indices of her creative prowess. Thus, her judicious use of vivid literary devices to reflect the situation of the African American is commendable. Some of the noticeable literary devices include:

- i. Situational Irony
- ii. Rhetorical Questioning
- iii. Enjambments

## **9.0 Conclusion**

The Caribbean or West Indian literary tradition and African American literary tradition are two peculiar traditions that can be extrapolated as being similar. From the perspective of socio-historical experiences of the two traditions, the inextricable nature of the two traditions is vivid.

It has been established by scholars as well as in the cause of this study that; Caribbean and African American literary traditions cannot be ostracized from the society that produces them. This submission buttresses the functional nature of the two traditions which derives its thesis from the blueprint provided by the society. Thus, the literature of the Caribbean or the West Indies emphasizes slavery and colonialism and the agitations to deconstruct and reconstruct self and the essence of being. In the same vein, the literature of the African-American society asserts the African-American history as one which was set in motion by the events of the transatlantic slave trade.

With the two traditions drawing considerably from the slavery experiences of their people, there is a resonating use of slavery and subjugation as a thesis in the literary writings etched out from the two traditions. Consequently, we can extrapolate that the two traditions adopt reactionary literature which dwells on the reclamation of the distortions necessitated by this uniform experience.

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