

## **"Yes We Can" – A Recurrent Decimal in African Diaspora Literature**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The United States of America is a nation that was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." But this creed did not merge freedom with racial equality for the people of African ancestry. This paper focuses on the hope, aspirations, determination, struggles, resistance and the resilient spirit of African Americans from the slave era in the plantation complex of America to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The paper proposes that as Barack Obama has emerged as the first black president of America, the important message for white American is that enduring peace cannot be bought at the expense of other people's freedom, hence the need for both blacks and whites to return to peace and integration; human rights and respect for all people to promote an enduring environment free from fear, terror and horror.

### **INTRODUCTION**

African-American literature is the aesthetic chronicle of a race struggling in the face of enslavement, oppression, deprivation and the near-total subjugation of a people's right to live. The engendering impulse of this literature is resistance to inequality, discrimination, injustice, exploitation – all forms of human tyranny; the sustaining spirit of the literature is dedication to human rights and dignity. It is a literature

created by the oppressed to indict oppression. This paper focuses on the hope, determination, tenacity and the resilient spirit of African-Americans in the face of hopelessness, in a hostile and oppressive white society. It emphasizes the struggles, aspirations, resistance and resoluteness of African-Americans from the slave era in the plantation complex of America to the 21<sup>st</sup> century where an African-American, Barack Obama, has earned the number one position in American political history.

### **Synopsis of the African-American Life**

The United States of America is a nation that was conceived in liberty and it is dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." (Dubois, 72). But this creed did not merge freedom with racial equality for people of African ancestry. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, African-Americans knew that the institution of slavery stood in the way of realization of this dream. According to Emenyi and Okon, in another situation, "slavery had established their... [the] status of African-Americans as subhuman beings" (3), and according to Adele Alexander, "they had no rights under English Law (10). Their challenge and agitation were (and still are) meant to produce a society more faithful to the language and intent of the constitution with regard to liberty, equality and freedom.

The emancipation proclamation was a giant step towards a truly United States of America but slavery had been abolished only in words, not in deeds, and so the dream of black democracy swiftly evaporated. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) had already come to being at the end of the Civil War in 1865. As Reconstruction collapsed after a few years: black voting rights were suppressed, racial segregation was imposed while, lynching, race riots and school burning spread. State-sanctioned racism emerged in the South and infected the



North. The systematical oppression of one race by the other in the "Jim Crow" system of laws remained virtually intact until the 1950s. In the Southern States, the blacks were not allowed to vote or sit in juries or take part in enforcing the law. The blacks were not allowed to go to the same schools as white people, they were not allowed to eat in the same restaurants; to travel on the same trains, cars or live in the same neighbourhoods, or shop from the same outlets.

The extreme racial animosity led the blacks in Americans to head North to escape the persecution in what became known as the "Great Urban Migration." The "Back-to-Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey inculcated racial pride among the blacks and the socio-cultural rebirth of the 1920s culminated in the acceptance and celebration of African-American culture. With these, the New Negro emerged in America's racial politics. The "New Negro" sought to structure his life in terms of a culture to which he was denied full access. According to Robert Bone, "the Negro's deepest psychological impulses alternate between the magnetic poles of assimilation and negro nationalism" (4). Bone explains that the polar opposite of assimilation which is Negro nationalism is an urge or desire to blackness, race pride and solidarity within the race; trying to build the self-esteem or identity which the whites shattered. The sentiment is anti-white and is accompanied by a bitter hatred for everything white and results in militant Negro nationalism. He explains further that Negro militant nationalism is both revolutionary and separatist, proposing to meet violence with counter violence and to take life for life. "It is a necessary struggle against segregation and equality. It stresses self determination and resists integration into the dominant culture" (4). Integration, on the other hand, is the acceptance of the individual without merit or the fault that is found because of race.

Slowly, painfully and doggedly, African Americans fought back through litigation, education and lobbying.

Campaigns of civil disobedience evolved into the civil right movement, while racial classification and fragmentation resulted in the racial violence of the ku klux klan and its retaliation by the Black Panther. In 1954, the Supreme Court finally outlawed segregation in schools. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination in employment. Similarly, the 1965 Voting Rights Act restored and protected black voting rights. The rising hope was personified by Martin Luther King who organised the march through Washington DC, asking for jobs and freedom in 1963, to dramatize the appalling poverty and discrimination against blacks in the Southern States and to demand civil rights legislation. Progress came soaked in the blood of African-American martyrs.

The closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a sexual revolution where female talents questioned and queried the status-quo and traditional boundaries of power from the racial and sexual standpoints. In spite of this, the political power of African-Americans swelled gradually and hopes rose. The pace of political change for black Americans had been up with impossible swiftness until Obama emerged the first person of African descent to lead the country which has served as the world's policeman for human rights and democracy, irrespective of the contradictions at home because of its insistence on race and skin colour as the determinant of human worth. It is this hope, struggle and resistance in the face of hopelessness that constitute the focus of this paper.

### **Varied Expressions of the "Yes We Can" Spirit in African-American Literature**

From the plantation where blacks who came from Africa for the purpose of slave labour, worked, especially in the Southern States, the blacks started to display their dogged hope and resilient spirit in weathering the storms of oppression and exploitation. The "work songs" were the earliest protest songs for the blacks. They expressed covert



complaints about the way the blacks were over-worked. Bateye asserts that the "work songs" were timid attempts of the blacks to voice their frustration of bondage and desire for freedom. He explains that the theme of the work songs and the "spirituals" were associated with the struggles of blacks to attain freedom (178). The cry was for liberty. The "spirituals" is of special significance because while it ostensibly was sung as hymns in praise of God, it was used as a rallying cry for freedom.

Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano were the earliest voices of black written literature in English in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Phillis Wheatley, whose fortunate status contrasts to the lot of impoverished blacks in Boston's ghetto, did not commit her writing to the subject of protest against slavery. More pronounced, however, in her poems, as well as Jupiter Hammon's are issues of religious devotedness. They saw no evil with slavery, rather, for them; slavery was a deliverance from "heathenism". Their desire for freedom was anchored in a spiritual heaven.

Evident in Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1989) is the spirit of self-determination and defiance. The work is a first-hand testimony against slavery which places much emphasis on the atrocities of slavery and pleads for its total and immediate abolition. Equiano uses his African origin to establish his credibility as a critic of European rapacity. His memories of his African origin are almost unreservedly positive. Freedom, not the consolation of religion, emerges as the top priority of his life in slavery. In his autobiography, he narrates negatively the savagery of European slavery; the atrocity that was the "Middle Passage" as this excerpt shows:

Does not slavery itself depresses the mind, and extinguish all its fire and every noble sentiment? But, above all, what advantages do not a refined people possess over those who

are rude and uncultivated. Let the polished and haughty European recollect that his ancestors were once, like Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did nature make them inferior to their sons? And should they too have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No. (Norton Anthology, 150 – 151).

Another writer of this period, George Moses Horton (1797 – 1883) who was both a slave and a poet, expressed his feelings about enslavement. Though concerned with romantic love, religion and death, three of Horton's poems in *Hope of Light* shed light on his feelings about slavery. He opposes slavery overtly. His poem, "Division of an Estate" where there is expression of his subtle rhetoric of protest and its pathetic rendition of the slave's plight at the moment of auction. His poems on slavery attack the injustices, rather than simply complain of the constraints, of slavery and racism.

Frederick Douglass (1818 – 1895) was another writer of this period. He rose through the ranks of the anti-slavery movement in the 1840s and 1850s to become black America's most electrifying speaker and commanding writer and the premier African-American leader and spokesman for his people during the later half of the 19th century. He dedicated his leadership to the ideal of building a racially integrated America in which skin colour would cease to determine an individual's social value and economic options. On the one hand, Douglass devoted his literary effort primarily to inspire in blacks the belief that colour must not be a permanent bar to their achievement of the American Dream. On the other, he reminded the whites of their obligation as Americans to support free and equal access to that dream for Americans of all races. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass narrates the ordeals, cruelties and barbarity of slavery.

Another writer, James M. Whitfield writes an anthology of poems titled *America and Other Poems*. In the title poem of the collection, Whitfield narrates the hypocrisies of America and the lies that under-girded slavery. He expresses his moral outrage and bitterness on slavery in the following lines

America, it is to thee  
Thou boasted land of liberty,  
It is to thee I raise my song,  
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong.  
It is to thee, my native land,  
From whence has issue many a band  
To tear the black man from his soul,  
And force him here to delve and toil;

...  
Stripped of those rights which Nature's  
God

Bequeath to all the human race,  
Was it for this, that freedom's fires  
Were kindled by your patriot sires?  
Was it for this, they shed their blood  
On hill and plain, on field and flood?  
Almighty God! Tis this they call  
The land of liberty and law  
Part of its sons baser thrall  
Than Babylon or Egypt saw  
Worse scenes of rapine, lust and shame,  
Than Babylonian ever knew  
Are perpetrated in the name  
Of God, the holy, just, and true;  
(Norton Anthology, 402 – 405)

The poem ends with a plea to the God "of justice, virtue, love and truth" to "save" blacks and "repay" America of its guilt, and "burst the bonds of every slave" (405).

The Reconstruction period witnessed the legislation by the reunited states of laws designed to limit African-

Americans socially, politically and economically. Some legislations even took away freedoms and outlawed practices that had been relatively common before the Civil War. With their pertinacious and resolute spirit, blacks fought back. The last part of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th century became known in African-American history as the "Decades of Disappointments" or "the Nadir of Black Experience". The reason for this downfall were many. For example, while some abolitionists believed in equal rights for blacks, many did not. The anti-slavery societies, by and large, had been segregated.

Booker T. Washington founded the Tuskegee Institution in 1881 with its emphasis on vocational training and manual labour. He was concerned with promoting the socio-economic progress of blacks but did not challenge segregation. Tuskegee was founded on a philosophy of thrift, hardwork, self-reliance, and patience, which Washington latter articulated in his famous Atlanta Exposition Speech (1895).

In *Up From Slavery*, he saw slavery a "school" from which his fellow blacks had graduated with honours, and with the will and skill to keep rising, instead of describing it as the hell on earth that many black Americans believed slavery was. Washington's rhetoric portrayed enslavement and all the injustices attendant to it as more of a help than a hindrance; that slavery and racism were not really been so bad for African-Americans, after all. He writes:

Ever since I have been old enough to think of myself, I have entertained the idea that, notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did. The hurtful influences of the institution were not by any means confined to the Negro (Norton Anthology, 496)



Known as a radical on the other hand, DuBois stood for militant and unrelenting opposition to all forms of racism. He claimed that Washington mistakenly asked black Americans to forgo three essential freedoms: the vote, civil equality and higher education for youths. Clearly, Washington's philosophy of accommodation implied no threat to segregation. Consequently, Washington was mercilessly criticized as an "Uncle Tom" and accused of facilitating the increased lynching and declining conditions of southern blacks by his "live and lets live attitude". DuBois was proud of his African heritage and played a pivotal role in the organisation of the Nigara Movement which in 1910 became the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People), an association that became the rallying point for African-Americans. It signalled the radicalization of Negro agitation and continued assault on white discrimination against blacks. The NAACP was committed to Negro aims and ideals and the transformation of the Negro mind to think positively.

DuBois also organised several Pan-African congresses in Europe and New York and was committed to searching for a way to address fundamental problems of blacks, segregation and injustice in the United States. He wrote "A Litany of America" to protest the brutal outbreak of violence against African-Americans in Atlanta. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he does not only indict and revolt against the slave system but also lays claims to American citizenship for African-Americans along with white Americans, a position James Weldon Johnson affirms and justifies in his poem, "Fifty Years":

For never let the thought arise  
That we are here on sufferance bare;  
Outcast, assylumed 'neath these skies,  
And aliens without part or share.

This land is ours by right of birth  
This land is ours by right of toil;  
We helped to turn its virgin earth  
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil (Norton  
Anthology, 771)

Paul Laurence Dunbar, another writer of the Reconstruction, who wrote in black dialect and idioms also expressed racial solidarity with blacks as well as his protest against slavery. In "Ode to Ethiopia," he narrates the glory and hurts of slavery. In "Not They Who Soar" and "We Wear the Mask," Dunbar indicts the white world and blames it for the predicament and hurts of black people.

But in the decade of the 1920s, the African-American came of age; he became assertive, culturally and radically conscious as if for the first time. He proclaimed himself to be a man and deserving of respect, not a ward of society, nor a creature to be helped, pitied or explained away. The decade was a period of transformation, from the "old" to the "new", hence, the expression "New Negro", which came with a positive self-concept. The New Negro was intelligent, articulate and self-assured. He would insist upon his rights and, if need be, return violence for violence and blow for blow. He defined himself in new terms, outside the convenient stereotypes. African-Americans wrote poems, stories and painted and sculpted and infused new life into the American theatre. It symbolised black liberation and sophistication and the final shaking off of the residuals of slavery, in the mind, spirit and character of black Americans.

The proclamation of the "New Negro" was a statement by black intellectuals that actual emancipation could no longer be denied. The New Negro expressed the feeling that he was not only capable of tolerance, co-operation, love and "accommodation" as preached by Washington, but also capable of anger, hatred, resentment and retaliation.

Claude McKay's protest poems, "To the White Fiends" and "If We Must Die", and Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" typify the spirit of the Renaissance. In "I, Too", Hughes, like Dubois and Johnson, claims American identity and citizenship:

I, too, sing America

I, too, am America (Norton Anthology, 1258).

The "New Negro" was bold and assertive enough to lay claim of his American citizenship because in the words of James Weldon Johnson in his "Fifty Years", "African Americans have more than paid the price"(771). This was the voice of emerging black self-assertion and the "yes we can" spirit of African-Americans. This was why black spokesmen demanded for an end to mob violence against blacks and convinced the government to protect blacks from lynch mobs, or blacks would retaliate meeting violence with violence. The fighting spirit of the blacks was at its peak.

Black radicals also called for African-American identity with Africa and for forms of Pan-African unity. Marcus Garvey, a black Zionist from Jamaica, led a bloodless revolution. Its slogan was: "Africa for Africans". This was the first Black Nationalist movement in history; and it had an international programme committed to win political and social freedom for the world's black people. Millions of blacks migrated back to Africa. This movement was ridiculed by whites and even by Negro elite. Marcus Garvey also formed the UNIA (The Universal Negro Improvement Association) which gave the Negroes a sense of racial solidarity, awareness and self-determination. These forms of assertions were a demonstration of the "yes we can" spirit.

Jean Toomer, one of the outstanding writers of the Harlem movement, was apparently interested in issues of race and freedom for African-Americans particularly if they contributed to his achievement of inner peace. In *Cane*, Toomer reveals the agonies and humiliations of the African-

American people in the United States through the existing conflicts in interaction between them and white America. He highlights the sordid experience of racial fragmentation. But Toomer stayed the issue of race by referring to himself as an American. His vision of freedom was holistic and encompassing. He took into consideration the totality and the fragmentary nature of the races that make up the American society. He was more interested in the fusion of white and black or red-skinned people into a new entity: the blue man. This, in a way was, also Toomer's demonstration of his resilient search for freedom. *Cane* is a reflection of this conception of "New Americans", a racial mixture that Toomer believed would cushion or redeem America from racial tension. Here, he uses sexual interaction between whites and blacks to bridge the gulf which has always separated one from the other (Emenyi, 12).

The literary success of the Harlem Renaissance notwithstanding, the burden of blackness was a pervasive reality during the Depression of the 1930s. In *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Richard Wright reveals and exposes the stifling effects of racism and the extreme deprivation which social compartmentalization of human beings has brought on African-Americans. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is an outright protest against racism and an exposition of the hypocrisy of the white society; and an exploration of sexual racism and social dislocation. This deprivation is summarised in Bigger Thomas' statement:

We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. it's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence (*Native Son*, 17).

For Chester Himes, there was no escape from the reality of America. His preoccupation was the Negro revolution. His hatred for racism drove him out of American



society; he left in 1953 for Europe, an experience which is expressed in his *My Life of Absurdity*. Himes writes:

I travelled through Europe trying desperately to find a life into which I would fit; and my determination stemmed from my desire to succeed without America... I never found a place where I even began to fit, due in great part to my antagonism toward all white people, who, I thought, treated me as an inferior (Norton Anthology, 1468).

Until his death in 1984, Himes made only brief trips back, usually from/to New York City.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* represents the conscious desire of the African American frustrated struggle to be seen and to exist in an estranged white society which stifles his aspirations. The novel, in a way, is an indictment on white society that has refused to live up to the words and intent of the American constitution with regard to freedom and liberty.

For James Baldwin, he was concerned with the growing disillusionment with the American racial situation which denied African-Americans access to justice and equality. In *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, he registers hope that blacks would be integrated into an American society where the healing force of love abounded but *The Fire Next Time* shows evidence that all belief in the redemptive possibilities of love is shattered. In an essay, a situation which is also in "Stranger in the Village", he posits:

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the

luxury of looking at me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive... this world is white no longer, and it will never be white again (Norton Anthology, 1679).

Baldwin believes that America cannot be a white nation after centuries of Africanist presence in the United States.

A female writer of this period, Handsberry, wrote a play titled *A Raisin in the Sun* where she quotes a line from Langston Hughes' *Mother to Son* and finally settles on a line from "Harlem", another of Hughes' poem:

What happens to dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the Sun?

Or fester like a sore-

And then run?

...

Or does it explode?

(Norton Anthology, 1728).

The play is, therefore, a dramatization of "deferred dreams" that ever threaten to explode. In her works, Handsberry was committed to black liberation struggles besides the Pan-African dimension of her work. She was actively involved in peace and freedom movements.

The inability or refusal of white America to treat black as equal citizens precipitated the Civil Rights struggle and political violence of the 1960s in American politics. In their protest against white society's refusal to give African Americans their due as full citizens as stated in the American constitution, some African-American writers demonstrated total rejection of occidental values in their quest for an authentic black personality. This was expressed through the separatist ideology which Elijah Mohammed, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and LeRoi Jones used in their search for a functional identity in America.

Apparently, this search for functional identity was one of the main objectives of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s as reflected in the emphasis on black freedom. This programme transformed the manner in which black people in the United States of America were defined, represented, portrayed or treated in literature and the arts. The protest took various dimensions. Some black Americans joined the Nation of Islam and rejected slave names and substituted African designations. LeRoi Jones who changed his name to Amiri Baraka was one of the writers who used his poem, essays and drama to protest against racial imbalance. In the process, he advocated revolution as a means of confronting America for the injustice inflicted on the black people.

However, Martin Luther King Jr. used non-violence to address Civil Rights matters in relation to black. In *Letter from Birmingham Jail* which he wrote in jail, he castigates white institutionalized injustices against African-Americans. He asserts that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (Norton Anthology, 1854). This accounts for why he preached integration and demanded for black freedom, justice and fair play even as he observes:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds... We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. (Norton Anthology, 1854).

The fact which King has established here is that it is immoral to give the black people an outsider status in the United States.

In his famous speech "I Have a Dream," King expresses disillusionment about the "manacles of segregation

and the chains of discrimination" characteristic of the American society because "America has defaulted" in its promise "that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". (**Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology**, 872). He, however, prophesied on the prospect of freedom for the black people in America:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed... this is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. (**Black Writers of America: A Complete Anthology**, 873).

From the 1970s, the burning embers of consciousness that African-Americans were not second-class citizens culminated in a flowering of female talents who rose to redefine and reconfigure the group women outside the boundaries defined by the status-quo. This period has witnessed the excavation of black history and literature by Creative writers such as Alice Walker, Paul Marshall, Ntozake Shange, Torvi Mornson, among many others. are central to the exaction. While earlier writers, whites and blacks, had dismissed slavery as shameful, African-Americans of the contemporary period focused on the slave era as a way of understanding the present. Toni Morrison goes back to the slave era and focused on a small Kentucky farm in *Beloved*, a work which mirrors the pains, sufferings, rejection and cruelty of slave experiences. The protagonist is degraded to animal level, milked like a cow and sexually abused. It is the horror of the institution of slavery, which compels her to kill her youngest baby. In spite of the psychological-damage on her, she expiates her guilt because she has succeeded to stop what happened to her from happening to her child.

Though, she is haunted by *Beloved*, Sethe overcomes this devastation with the help of her daughter and the black community. The message in this unique story is profound.



Again Emenyi and Okon have revealed that Morrison uses *Beloved* to:

Confront the conscious of America over slavery as a crime against black humanity. If the National Museum in Washington, D.C. has acknowledged the holocaust which relates to the extermination of six million Jews, why has the same institution ignored African American history which points to the destruction of sixty million blacks in the middle passage? Morrison's admonition: 'That is not a story to pass on' is ironic because there is a link between the past and the present; and just like Sethe, the American nation will continue to have a haunted present except it deals with the injustices it has meted out on the African American people (21).

Apart from pointing out the gory and devastating features of slavery, Morrison appears to caution the white people to put away discrimination and blatant racism against blacks because of its repulsive and negative devastations.

In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, She uses her life story of abuse, suffering and shame which is analogous to the African-American experience as a race, and her success story as one who struggled and prevailed to demonstrate the aspirations, the hopes and dreams of the black race. This hope and dream for continued upward march to equality, freedom and human dignity was fulfilled when Senator Barrack Obama became the 44th President of the United States of America – the first black President of the United States of America.

#### Conclusion

From the plantation in America through the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 to the present, the blacks people have come a long way in the struggle for positive identity in the United States. In their emancipation years, African-Americans were crippled by discrimination: they

lived amidst material prosperity as a poor ethnic minority. White America's refusal to genuinely give the people of African descent a true self-consciousness despite its egalitarian creed had exposed the African-American people to a great dilemma. In those years, the United State was a racist society where hate, horror and violence reigned. America gave the black people fear and pain. It was a prison without hope yet the people of African ancestry refused to be hopeless.

The activities of such pressure groups as the NAACP, UNIA, Black Nationalism the of Civil Rights Movements and the emergence of seasoned campaigners like Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, among many others, are tangible evidence of the resilience, hope, struggle of the "yes we can" spirit of African-Americans. Thus, Legal landmark victories have been won through struggle, fight and different acts of protests. An important message for white America with the emergence Barrack Obama is that enduring peace depends on mutual respect for others because our common humanity is a non negotiable reality.

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