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A Theatre of a History: Major Themes in Early African-American Theater and their Relations with the History

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Abstract

Although it is not the first literary type that comes to mind about African-American literature, the drama has become an important form of black self-expression. The black theater, modernized with time and adapted to the popular formats of the era, has achieved rapid development in the after-slavery period. The Harlem Renaissance was especially a booming era in this respect. This genre may sometimes appear as reinterpretations of the classics like Shakespeare's works with a black point of view, but most often it appears as exclusive works, which belong to, and produced for black people. Such race loyalty gives clues for Black Nationalism, which is frequently used as a theme in theatrical works of the colored nation. Slavery; search for equal rights; the utopia of a fresh beginning as free blacks in another country; and the lives of historical personalities that have marked the blacks' struggle for freedom are also among the themes that the early black theater has handled recurrently. In this study, the relationship between the history and the theater of blacks in America will be analyzed by exemplifying and discussing major themes used in the early African-American Theater.

Keywords: *African-American Theater, Slavery, Black Nationalism, Harlem, Colonization, Equity, Justice*

1. Introduction

The view that starts the black theater with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and that does not appreciate the works given before it, is found inaccurate by some experts. The origins of the black theater go back to ancient Egypt, far before Hansberry or her ancestors. However, until recently, Egyptian civilization was not counted in African heritage and was included in the Middle East studies. Nevertheless, blacks have the right to take pride in

ancient Egyptian civilization, as much as whites do in ancient Greek because some late 19th century studies show that Pharaohs were genetically related to sub-Saharan blacks, and this provides evidence for an African Egypt. Almost a thousand years before dithyrambs, which were said to be the first examples of tragedy made in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility in Athens, there persisted Memphite drama in ancient Egypt. These first drama examples in Africa consisted mostly of verbal improvisations compared to their western-culture counterparts (Hatch, 1991, p. 16).

The white theater in America takes its roots from England, where the impersonators for black race were seen on the stage long before the blacks stepped foot in the country. For instance, Balthasar character, one of the kings representing African races who brought gifts to Baby Jesus, was performed by white players. In the 16th century, demons and evil characters were represented by the players wearing black masks. For the next few centuries, black people continued to be shown beastly, disgusting, out of everyday life, and exotic on the stage. With the increment of the slave trade, the Balthasar image of the old times was replaced by the character of Friday who was merely qualified to serve the main hero of Defoe's novel. Such foul depictions of blacks became a tradition as many white playwrights frequently used the "slave black" character in their plays (1991, p. 15).

1.1.Blacks in the White Theater

The roots of African theater in America are based on the people brought to the continent as slaves. One of the traditions these people brought from the black continent with them was that a group of people would come together to exchange improvised dialogues for entertainment. These improvisations used to occur as small performances of black people in slave plantations. Later on, they had a significant impact on American culture. These shows were the source of "minstrel shows" in which blacks were mocked by whites with painted faces (Nadler, 2002, p. 94). While giving information about minstrels, Edis and Görmez state:

Minstrel shows began in the 1830's and ended up popular in the U.S. from 1840-1880. There was a wide range of minstrel troupes that performed around the nation. Prior to the Civil War, Black Americans were prohibited from performing in minstrel shows. When it finished, African Americans shaped their own minstrel troupes. (Edis & Görmez, 2019, p. 149)

In minstrels, the first contribution of the Americans to the theater, the white men imitated the music, dance, speech, and culture of the black people. These performances were mostly humiliating for blacks as they were the birthplace of symbolic stereotypes. As indicated by researchers; “Many minstrel shows included three main characters: ‘Jim Crow’ was the cliché cheerful slave, ‘Mr. Tambo’ was a happy performer, and ‘Zip Coon’ was a free dark man attempting to 'put on an act's to transcend his position” (Edis & Görmez, 2019, p. 149). All stereotypes were the manifestation of being black in the white man’s point of view. The minstrels became so popular that they endured until the middle of the 20th century. Even some black theater groups performed these shows. They used to darken their already black faces to imitate their own imitations and paint their eyes and lips in a way that they became more obvious. As the minstrel performances began to lose popularity in the late 19th century, some black composers and writers began to turn their attention to musicals. A musical revolution occurred in the American musicals with ragtime and jazz that emerged as a result of this shift (Hatch, 1991, pp. 30–32).

The black stereotypes at the minstrel shows were somehow admirers of the white slave owners, and they were ecstatic when they got the slightest favor from them. The accent used by blacks is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the stereotypes. The playwrights used the black accent frequently to emphasize that blacks were inferior to whites and make viewers laugh (1991, pp. 17–18). One of these playwrights, Manuel Noah, so skillfully handled black Americans’ daily lives in his plays that the ‘nigger’ image in the theater mostly owes its existence to him (Hay, 1999, p. 15). In his views on the first black theater company, African Grove Theater, which was founded in New York in 1820 by W. A. Brown (Nadler, 2002, p. 94), he mocks Black English (Hay, 1999, p. 16).

Another theme repeatedly used by white playwrights is slave-freeing, which served as the representation of the mercy of the white man. It was used so many times that whites were already beginning to believe that they were held dear by their slaves. Sometimes a freed slave could ask a master to kill him instead of freeing him since he would not find the mercy of his owner in free life. Such unreasonable scenes about blacks, which aimed to relieve white consciences, have become so popular after the Civil War that whites started to think that their slaves really loved them (Hatch, 1991, pp. 20–21).

Another deliberate misrepresentation of blacks in the white theater is their portrayal as cowards. Despite the estimated sixty-five thousand black soldiers who died during the Civil War years, the black image in the theater was no more than rats escaping from the war. As a

reaction, black playwrights wrote plays that highlight the courage of their folk. Some of them dealt with the dilemma of defending a country that was owned by whites. But in the end, the sense of belonging to the country always won against the anger towards whites. Blacks who fought for their country could also fight for the rights they lacked (1991, pp. 21–22).

1.2.The Black Theater Awakens

The claim of an all-black theater was occasionally voiced by many critics such as William E. B. DuBois. The roots of this demand go back to the Harlem Renaissance (Hatch, 1991, p. 33). As a result, many classical plays, including those belonging to Shakespeare, were staged by all-black actors (Cuddon, 2013, p. 82). Ironically, whites accused blacks of racism after such performances. Some black playwrights have reflected Black Power –an organized popular movement on black rights- into their plays in the late 60s. But not all black plays were political. The problems of daily life were also among the subjects of the black theater. For instance, *The Chip Woman's Fortune* by Willis Richardson, the first serious play staged on Broadway which was written by a black, is a play that promotes generosity and honesty among the oppressed (Hatch, 1991, pp. 33–35). Before this play, the blacks had already stepped on Broadway, but merely with musical comedies (Nadler, 2002, p. 94).

Just like DuBois, philosopher Alain Locke believed that the black theater should develop and leave the white man's yoke. Locke aimed to transform the black theater into education centers. But neither he nor DuBois could imagine how difficult it would be to tell blacks that characters like Manuel Noah's buffoon nigger were humiliating. Nobody seemed to take offense at the black stereotypes on the stage. To change this perception, both Locke and DeBois worked hard and made important contributions to the development of the black theater intellectually (Hay, 1999, pp. 15–19).

The immigration of southern blacks to cities in the north such as New York due to the ongoing racism and various economic and political reasons is a cultural milestone for African-Americans. The intellectual and artistic influx that concentrated on the Harlem region of New York as a result of this movement formed the infrastructure of the period called “The Harlem Renaissance” (Berke et al., 2019, pp. 686–687), which is simply defined as “a radical rise in the black world” initiated by civil and artistic causes (Edis & Bilem, 2019, p. 36).

1.3. The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance is often used to express the artistic productivity of African-American artists in Harlem starting in 1920 and ending just before the Second World War. However, this time-span of fifteen years mentioned in this definition is insufficient to define the period as it is still possible to see the effects of the Harlem Renaissance on American literature today (Berke et al., 2019, pp. 686–687). Some studies, albeit few, indicate theater as the most important product of this period. The theater was the first step in the evolution of Black Nationalism, which in turn helped create a theater unique to the black. The black theater theory has promoted black literature as a whole, and theater has become an important means for black people to express themselves (Krasner, 2002, p. 1). Another name for this formation is the 'The New Negro' movement. This name comes from the anthology of the same name, compiled by Alain Locke in 1925. This book has become an object of artistic and intellectual self-confidence for black Americans. Although other writers and intellectuals also contributed to the commencement of this movement, Locke became the intellectual locomotive of the era with *The New Negro* and was considered the father of the Harlem Renaissance (Gray, 2011, pp. 231–232). This period is also an important and productive period for the black theater. Numerous small theater communities staged the works of blacks (Nadler, 2002, p. 94).

While the black theater flourished in this way, whites began to scrutinize the place of blacks in American society. Major playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill began to feature black characters that went beyond stereotypes in his works (2002, p. 94). Whites began to think that they understood blacks better. But the situation was a little more complicated than that. Centuries of slavery and accompanying persecutions were a cultural heritage for the black theater. The only way to understand the struggle given in those circumstances was to be black. In other words, a white man did not have the necessary background to get the message of a play in black theater. For this, he had to be black and his history had to be filled with memories of punishments for this innate feature. Since this was not possible, it was unrealistic for whites to say that they understood the plays written by blacks. Accordingly, most white critics' views on the black theater are not considerable (Hatch, 1991, p. 36).

2. Major Themes in African American Theater and Their Relations to the History

Some of the most prominent themes of the Black American Theater are “slavery, Black heroes, and contributions of the race to civilization. ... [and] the fight for equity and justice” (Mayo, 2019, p. 32). Besides, “colonization” is also a popular theme in early plays (Hatch, 1987, p. 14).

2.1. Slavery

For many black American writers, the act of writing was to revisit the past and make history meaningful from a personal perspective. To shape the future, it was necessary to face the common past in different ways. For black playwrights, the first thing to confront related to the past was the slavery institution (Graham, 2004, p. 5). The southern parts of the U.S. were among the regions where slavery was deeply rooted. Although most of the southern population was made up of poor peasants, there was an undeniable existence of an upper class living an aristocratic life thanks to the comfort and wealth brought by their slaves (Vanspanckeren, 1994, p. 12). Although the situation reversed after the Civil War, the south was the richest region in the country in those days. The slavery institution had a large share in that wealth. It is possible to say that the contributions of the south to the American literary accumulation are full of traces of the region’s slavery background (1994, p. 144). The 1800s are the years when the distinction is made between good and evil in the American theater. Many playwrights frequently dealt with problems that disturbed society, such as slavery. Those plays could appear as original theater works, or as novel adaptations such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1994, p. 77).

Literature produced by those who opposed slavery in northern America and the British Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries is called ‘abolitionist literature’. This literature takes its stem from the slave revolts resulted from inhuman practices in the Caribbean colonies. The pioneers of this movement would often make much use of the Bible's discourse to gather sympathy for anti-slavery campaigns. Slave narratives, in which fugitive slaves told their own life stories, were among the most sought-after genres of pre-war literature. Many such works during this period caused controversy about the basics of the slavery institution in northern America. Such debates, one of the reasons that led to the Civil War (1861-1865), resulted in the abolition of slavery officially in 1865 (Cuddon, 2013, p. 3).

Slavery appears before the audience as a theme in many early theatrical productions. One of these works is *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom* written by former slave William Wells Brown in 1858 (Mayo, 2019, p. 29). Born as a slave in 1814 on a doctor's farm, W. W. Brown had worked as a servant, an editorial apprentice, a crew member on riverboats, and a doctor's assistant until the age of twenty. When he was twenty, he escaped from his owners and settled in Cleveland, married, and started a family. During his later life, he constantly traveled and gave anti-slavery lectures. Also, one can call him a human rights activist as he fought for the rehabilitation of prisons so that prisoners would have more humane conditions, and advocated for the voting rights of women. He attracted attention with his autobiography and continued his literary career with *Clotelle: or the President's Daughter*, the second novel written and published by a black. His theatrical work, *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom*, is the first black play released (Hatch, 1991, pp. 38–39).

The play is a satire of the slavery institution. It is the story of Cato, a doctor's slave, fooling everyone by acting silly and escaping to Canada. The song he sings when he flees for his freedom might be regarded as an emotional outburst against slavery: “I've not committed any crime, why should I run away? / Oh, shame upon your laws, dat drive me off to Canada” (1991, p. 40).

2.2. Colonization

Another theme frequently used in the early black American theater is colonization. Establishing an independent and all free black country in a certain region of Africa and placing blacks there is the essence of colonization. This idea also appears in the basis of Black Nationalism. People such as Prince Hall, the founder of African American Masonry and a pioneering abolitionist, gave petitions to authorities to ask for their help on this matter (Shields, 2001, p. 459). The idea of returning to Africa has been pondered upon by many black organizations. In 1811, thirty-eight black men and women moved to Sierra Leone as a result of some expeditions with the financial support of a wealthy merchant, Paul Cuffee, so for the first time, the colonization idea came to life. The foundation of such organizations as the American Colonization Society (ACS) and the Haytian Emigration Society had institutionalized separatist thought. The Haytian Emigration Society led the way for 6000 blacks to migrate to Haiti in the 1820s. But the main purpose of ACS, established under the auspices of Thomas Jefferson, was to send blacks to Liberia. Although ACS had been

criticized by some blacks that it was under the control of whites, the organization helped nearly 19,000 blacks migrate to Liberia in a fifty-year time (Muzorewa, 2007, pp. 53–54).

There was a special reason that Haiti was chosen as the destination for migration. It was colonized by France in 1697. The National Assembly of France assured to end the slavery in Haiti after the French Revolution, but they did not keep their promise. So the Haitian slaves rebelling under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture declared their independence in 1804. Its proximity to America, its warm climate which was more livable than Africa, and most importantly, its government which was constituted of black people were among the reasons why American slaves preferred Haiti as a destination. However, most of the immigrants had to return to America because of the instability of the political administration in Haiti (Lapsansky-Werner & Bacon, 2005, p. 96).

Many plays have been written by African-American playwrights about the Haitian uprising. One of them is Langston Hughes. As a highly productive writer, he has produced works of all kinds of literature. Although he is mostly known for his identity as a poet, he also made a name for himself with his plays. *Mulatto*, which he wrote in 1930, has received the title of a play written by a black that remained on display on Broadway for the longest time. In the 30s and 40s, he established three separate theater groups and produced successful plays (Turner, 1987, p. 136).

Emperor of Haiti is one of Hughes's most successful plays. Initially named *Drums of Haiti*, when it was first written in 1936, the play was developed by the author until its final form in 1963. Hughes tells the story of Jean Jacques Dessalines from slavery to kingship. In the play, he portrays the problems that the administration of the freshly founded empire encounters. The country is economically troubled and the king cannot ordain the freshly freed fellow slaves to work. After becoming a king, he leaves her loving wife and marries another woman who works for mulattos conspiring to overthrow him. When the king sets out to suppress a rebellion at the end of the play, he falls into a trap set by mulattos, and he is killed. Only the ex-wife mourns for the king. Hughes thus makes a depiction of a failed king (1987, pp. 145–146).

2.3. Black Nationalism

Laws of nature do not only apply to the material universe. The action-reaction law of nature sometimes determines our social relations. Centuries of exploitation and the inferior-race

depiction of blacks have led them to come up with a counter-reaction that puts them in a position to claim their own values. This is how Black Nationalism emerged.

Black Nationalism is defined with the assumption that blacks have a common culture, worldview, fate, and experience (Muzorewa, 2007, p. 53). It has been one of the toughest protest movements of black Americans since the early 1800s. The main ideas in this movement are specified as creating unity and consciousness among blacks as well as constituting political and economic independence for blacks (Blake, 1969, p. 15). By opposing racist and discriminatory state policies and demanding their correction, it aims to establish a state order in which socialist thought and common interests are at the center, and people do not feel low due to their skin color (Muzorewa, 2007, p. 53). While explaining the circumstances in which the movement emerged, Herman J. Blake states:

Black nationalist thought is a consequence of the duality of the experience of Afro-Americans, a people who are identified by racial characteristics as different from the "typical" American and denied full participation in this society for that reason, while, at the same time, they are expected to meet all the responsibilities of citizenship. (Blake, 1969, p. 16)

Another theme used in the black theater is Black Nationalism, the causes and purposes of which are explained above. *The Star of Ethiopia* is a perfect example in which W. E. B. DuBois aims to prove that black's contribution to the rise of civilization is not less than that of Europeans (Krasner, 2002, p. 82). It was written in pageant form. Pageants are performed usually "to celebrate or construct the history of a place or community; nearly always an 'occasional' form, done once or for a single run; very frequently performed by amateurs under professional direction" (Wallis, 2002, p. 579). The term, which was originally used for movable platforms where medieval plays were exhibited, is used for musicals and dance parades where historical representations are performed today. Especially at the beginning of the 20th century, they became a very popular type of entertainment where local historical events were revived (Cuddon, 2013, p. 506).

DeBois, a professor with a Harvard Ph.D., joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910 and established a magazine. In this magazine, he published valiant articles against racism and discrimination suffered by black people. In 1913, he wrote *The Star of Ethiopia* to celebrate the fiftieth-year of the abolishment of slavery (Hill, 1987, p. 2). Approximately thirty thousand people watched this pageant,

which was performed by three hundred and fifty actors for seven days. The audience witnessed Africans embroidering iron, establishing Egyptian civilization and the others, and eventually being sold to Europeans. Besides, such issues as the role of blacks in the discovery of the New World by the Europeans and their heroic struggle for freedom were on display (Hay, 1999, p. 79). With this pageant, DeBois intended to create a starting point for creating a theater specific to the black race by creating an awareness of black culture. Choosing the pageant genre, he believed that it would help blacks become culturally enlightened and independent. Each part of this show was adorned with dances, music, historical reenactments in a way to wake admiration for the history of blacks. *The Star of Ethiopia* aimed to enlighten not only blacks but also whites (Krasner, 2002, pp. 84–86).

2.4. Fight for Equity and Justice

The articles claiming to provide equal rights to every citizen in the founding constitution of the United States, the so-called land of freedoms, remained weak in practice. Many ethnic groups living in the country were not as lucky as European whites regarding constitutional rights. Blacks were the most aggrieved ethnic group in this regard. They were neither mentioned among the founder peoples of the state in the constitution nor were they protected by it. On the contrary, until 1808, slave trade was taken under constitutional protection. Rights such as voting given to whites were not granted to black people in most states with racist attitudes. Free blacks who could somehow throw off the slavery chains were also discriminated against by segregation laws (Wallenfeldt, 2011, p. 31). One of the most famous historical examples of this is the *Plessy v Ferguson* case. In 1896, an octoroon named Homer Plessy got into a railway car reserved for whites and was fined as a result by the local court. Considering this to be unfair, Plessy applied to the Supreme Court, but the judges approved the segregation practices and dismissed the case. The age of Jim Crow begins after this event (Bennett, 1993, p. 509).

In the 19th century, laws restricting the lives of black people and separating them from the white society were introduced. These legal regulations, called Jim Crow laws, were named after the songs and dances performed by Thomas Rice, who became famous for his clownish imitations of blacks at stage shows which soon became a stereotype representing African-Americans in the minds of whites. The Jim Crow laws were mainly aimed at separating whites and blacks in the public sphere. Schools, buses, hospitals, and even funerals were

services that blacks and whites could access separately. The signs stating 'White Only' or 'Colored Only' were everywhere. In places where it was not possible to serve black and whites in different buildings, such as banks or post offices, the whites had the privilege to get the service first. It is also possible to find traces of the Jim Crow laws in the antebellum era. The transformation of churches into places that serve blacks and whites separately is one of the typical indicators of this period (Fremon, 2000, pp. 27–28).

Although slavery was ended after the Civil War and the blacks finally could enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms of the whites constitutionally, the governments of the south did not stop legislating Jim Crow laws. In examples such as the "separate but equal" decision given by the high court in the *Plessy v Ferguson* case, many social organizations emerged against racist and sexist discrimination resulted from the segregation laws. In the early 20th century, DuBois and some other black and white Americans, who advocated racial equality, founded the NAACP. They filed lawsuits against racist laws and decrees and demanded equality between races in terms of education, employment, housing, and equal use of public opportunities (Wallenfeldt, 2011, p. 33). NAACP declares its mission as “to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons” (NAACP Foundation, n.d.).

During this period, many plays with racial-equality, and justice themes were written and performed. One of these plays is *Scottsboro Limited*, written by Langston Hughes. The play is inspired by a real life event. In 1931, nine innocent black young people were imprisoned for allegedly raping two white women on a train. The case held in Scottsboro, Alabama, caused an outcry for justice across the country. Many writers gave works to make a voice against such an injustice. For Hughes, the Scottsboro event is also an ideological turning point. When the closest followers of the incident and the defenders of the unjustly imprisoned children appeared to be communists, Hughes began to lean to the left politically. *Scottsboro Limited* uses agit-prop, a technique that encourages the audience to join the play with some players standing among the audience and contributing to the play by shouting in certain cases. In the trial scene where young people are accused of rape, for example, some actors, placed amongst the audience, perform the 'Mob Voices', the voice of racism. Nevertheless, another group that has the voice of conscience called 'Red Voices' suppresses the voice of racism (Hughes & Duffy, 2000, pp. 24–27). Thus, Hughes calls for justice, using

the theme of black youth being unjustly accused and imprisoned just because of their skin color.

2.5. Black Heroes

Finally, the last theme that will be mentioned in this study is 'black heroes'. Various plays about personalities, which have an important place in the history of black, have been written and performed. One of the figures that have an important place in the history of African-Americans is Nat Turner (1800-1831). Turner, the leader of the bloodiest slave rebellion in American history, knew how to read and write and was very much concerned with religion. In the dreams he had, he was informed that a great war was approaching between white and black and that he had to fight against the enemy in this war. Seeing a solar eclipse that occurred in those days as a sign, Turner and his supporters killed nearly 60 whites within forty hours, starting with the owners of the farm he was kept as a slave. He was soon caught and executed. A one-act play was written in 1934 by Randolph Edmonds about Nat Turner, who was regarded as a prophet by many blacks (Andrews, 2001, pp. 401–402). The name of the play is the same as that of the historical character: *Nat Turner*. Edmonds, who was born to slave parents, draws a devoted image of Turner in his play. In the evening before the attack, Turner explains to his supporters that the rebellion is God's will. At the end of the play, before he gets caught, he is confused about the moral correctness of what he had caused and asks God to lead him (Hill, 1986, pp. 409–410).

Another example is *The Amistad*, written by Owen Dodson in 1939. The play tells the story of an African prince named Joseph Cinque and dozens of blacks revolting on board while being taken to Puerto Principe as slaves by the Spaniards. The play gets its name from the ship. Cinque allegedly tells his friends: "I would not see you serve the white men, ... You had better be killed than live many moons in misery. ... I could die happy if by dying, I could save so many of my brothers from the bondage of the white men" (Katz, 1969, p. 104 as cited in Hill, 1986, p. 411). Thereupon, the slaves kill the captain and the cook and forgive the slave trader's life on the condition that he sails them back to Africa. But the slave trader deceives them and berths the ship to the American coast. Americans, who take over the ship, arrest, and try the slaves. With the defense of former American president, John Quincy Adams, the court finds them not guilty for the killings of the captain and the crew, as the incident happened for justified reasons on a foreign-flagged ship outside the American

territorial waters. This event attracted social attention so much that aids were collected and those on board eventually returned to Africa. Dodson's play ends with the victory songs of the blacks who are free at last. Edmonds and Dodson believed that they could raise society's consciousness with theater. They did this by demonstrating on the stage the lives and struggles of pioneering blacks against slavery, who have left deep prints in black history (Hill, 1986, pp. 411–412).

3. Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief, the theater tradition of Africans does not start very recently. Its origins can be traced back to Ancient Egyptian civilization, nearly one millennium older than ancient Greek tradition. But the representation of black folk in the white theater experienced a dramatic change to dark and grim images since the 16th century. Slavery was the primary phenomenon that changed the way the whites view them. Black slaves brought not only their labor force but also their cultures with them to the New World. Improvised dialogues made for entertainment purposes were a small part of this culture. These shows, which were the sources of the minstrel shows, were among the first forms of the African-American theater. In time, minstrel shows became a tool for whites to mock blacks by exaggerated imitations in every aspect of life. Jim Crow, one of the most well-known stereotypes, appeared in one of these shows, and later became an unpleasant example for the black image. These shows became so widespread and sought after that even black people started to perform them to make money, though it meant imitating themselves. Nevertheless, the dream of a completely black theater was enduring, even if the idea of a theater for black people was found racist and was criticized by the white. Many black intellectuals believed that the black theater should gain independence from that of white. For this purpose, black society needed awareness. As they had internalized and were so accustomed to the stereotypical characters that made blacks look evil, passive, and stupid in all types of literature that blacks needed a revival. In 1920, Harlem became the center of this awakening. Using this district as a base, black artists, writers, and thinkers began to create works to arouse the black society. The theater was one of the mediums used for this purpose.

Traces of past traumas are common issues in the black theater. Many traumatic events such as colonialism, slavery, and inferior-race image dominate the black theater themes. As a result of the Civil War between the north and south, slavery was officially abolished all over

the country. Having such an importance in U.S. history, slavery was used as a theme by many white and black playwrights.

The idea of colonization is another theme frequently used in black theater. Blacks' dreams of returning to Africa and establishing an independent state were partly actualized at the beginning of the 19th century. To that end, various social organizations which were formed by black Americans were helping a limited number of blacks achieve their freedom and independence. Besides Africa, Haiti was among the targets of this migration wave because the black population there had previously gained their independence after a successful uprising. Many successful works have been given related to the Haitian slave rebellion and the black utopia.

Like colonization idea, Black Nationalism also provided a fertile area for playwrights. The centuries of inferior-race depictions have caused the nationalist winds to blow in the black side of the theater as a reaction. As an institution, Black Nationalism aims to create unity and consciousness among blacks and establish a state order where there is no racial discrimination and everyone is treated equally. It takes its basis from the principle that blacks have a common culture, fate, and experience. This kind of nationalist attitude could be used in theater to show how blacks have a share in the construction of civilization.

Although, after the Civil War, the American constitution regarded all American citizens as equal, discriminatory attitudes on blacks still existed in practice. Blacks who escaped from slavery and tried to integrate into society as free individuals still had segregation barriers. Because of the Jim Crow laws separating blacks and whites in society, blacks could not receive purportedly 'different but equal' service. The quality of government services provided to blacks was considerably lower than that of whites. Although there was much evidence on inequality, the Supreme Court often approved these practices, which were worse than slavery. Blacks could not tolerate this and were organized in various ways against ongoing discrimination. So, they reflected their fight for equality in their works of theater.

The final theme of the black theater that is argued in this study is related to the historical personalities that have their marks on black history. In addition to black leaders such as Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Joseph Cinque, Frederick Douglass, white abolitionists such as John Brown were also subject to the black theater. The aim was to bring these people, all of whom marked black history whether with bloody riots or with the ideas they produced, to new generations, and create unity awareness through theater.

As a result, one can conclude that it is not possible to think of the early African-American theater separately from the history of blacks. Since the main material of all art forms is life, theater, which is a combination of literature and performance arts, feeds from the marrow of life. As seen in the example of this study, the lives that blacks lived –or rather, the lives they had to live, has found its reflection in the theater works produced by them.

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