

**Ana-Maria DEMETRIAN**



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*Resistance and Protest in Selected  
Twentieth-Century African-American Novels:  
A New Perspective*



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TO MY FAMILY



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Embarking upon such a challenging journey of discovery is not an easy task. Over the years I have come to a deeper understanding of what is usually termed as *African-American Literature*. Despite the difficulties encumbered by such a self-assumed task – here including the shortage of relevant bibliography in the Romanian libraries, and the overwhelming financial burden of attending relevant conferences in the field of African American Studies (both in the country and abroad) – I have been gratified by the assistance of a number of people who made my life bearable, and my work rewarding.

First of all, I should like to thank all my mentors all along. It is my duty to mention the whole staff of the Department of Anglo-American and German Studies of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Craiova for their unconditioned support along the years, and their encouragement when I needed it most. Had it not been for their understanding, my attempt at completing such a difficult task would have proved fruitless.

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offering me unlimited access to his personal library, by introducing me to the specialists in African-American Studies of CAAR, by pressing it on me to attend prestigious conferences in the field of American Studies, and opening my mind to the complexity and perils of approaching such a topic. He is the one who guided me through the strenuous process of writing this literary analysis.

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Last but not least, I should like to thank my family – both very young and not so young – for bearing with me. There have been moments of elation and difficulties, but they were with me. If they felt neglected, I apologize. If my little daughters felt Mammy had not enough time for them, I apologize. If my husband felt I should have done more, I apologize. If my mother ever felt that I was passing the whole burden upon her, I apologize. I know and I feel they will be forgiving.

Thank you!

Ana-Maria Demetrian



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*CBS – I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

*CP – The Color Purple*

*DR – Dessa Rose*

*GTIM – Go Tell It on the Mountain*

*NS – Native Son*

*OUSH – An Outline of U.S. History*

*PDLTLT – Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*

*SBF – The Souls of Black Folk*



## Foreword

The African American novels written between the 1940s and the 1980s offer a great variety of information and complex analysis of the human character and mind in oppressive circumstances. First and foremost, they are practically a repository of historical and cultural knowledge, including everything from slavery to the Civil War and its aftermath; from lynching and its effects to the politics of integration; from the crises of racial disenfranchisement and segregation to the restoration of black voting rights, urbanization and demographic change; from African Americans' problems and rights to African American women's problems and rights.

Prestigious writers like Toni Morrison, Sherley Anne Williams, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright manage to transform their novels *Beloved*, *Dessa Rose*, *The Color Purple*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and *Native Son* respectively into extremely interesting and widely influential works which play a major role in shaping and even changing or correcting – as the case may be – history, literature, culture, and life as such. The authors mentioned, through their manner of writing, show resistance and even protest to an unjust, harsh and sometimes cruel and shocking reality and in addition to this, their characters are strong examples of resistance and sheer protest against the life they are forced to live in the evil times and society of the nineteenth and the twentieth century America.

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The research hypotheses found at the basis of the current book have been formulated in accordance with the following questions:

1. *In which way can resistance and protest help or hinder the individual's development and human progress in general?* What I mean is black resistance in the face of oppression, of physical and psychological abuse, and black open protest to the injustices of a morally corrupt social and political system. Also, one encounters white resistance and protest towards the change in the social conventions and political ideas, which assure such a comfortable place for the white people in America. This is obvious in their racist attitude and behavior – ways of hiding their fear of the unexpected, of what they see as loss of control and not as proof of the so much advocated American democracy.

2. *How do the characters' acts of resistance and protest differ from the writers' ways of resisting and protesting to the realities of the twentieth-century America?* The characters are placed in real-life situations and their evolution or involution derives from the choices they make under oppressive circumstances. Thus, the characters' choices reflect their manners of resisting or protesting in the face of an unjust and often cruel reality. In the case of authors, their choices of the subject matter and narrative manner are indicative of their resistance and protest. On the one hand, there is the idea of disclosing the real workings behind racism, sexism, and class discrimination. On the other hand, the black writers create their stories on the basis of 'signifying' and 'call-and-response'. It means that their novels are written either as a counter-attack to the previously written books, or as a way of responding to other writings or beliefs expressed before.

3. *What is the reason for focusing on resistance and protest?*

There are two types of resistance and protest: constructive and destructive. The constructive type leads to individual growth and positive changes. The destructive type entails both self-destruction and human destruction. Nevertheless, the protagonists' journey through life is much more complex than that, because they do not all show their strengths or weaknesses from the very beginning. The protagonists' reactions to life experiences will uncover their character and even allow them to build on it.

4. *Is there any connection between the African-American writers and their characters in terms of gender?*

The answer to this question is definitely positive. Unlike the black men writers who focus a lot on their own gender issues and ignore or even discredit women and their role, the black women writers uncover not only their dual oppression (from racism and sexism) but they also acknowledge the important role of men in the African Americans' struggle for their rights, and also point out some of the black men's problems. Moreover, black women writers stress the necessity of building up a powerful, united community, and of highlighting the importance of man-woman relationship.

5. *What is the significance of the twentieth-century African-American novelists?*

Their narrative techniques help bring out the themes of the novels, and with them their messages for the readers: (1) the neo-slave narratives reveal the life of the slaves during slavery, shedding light on the individual, and not on the institution of slavery; (2) the epistolary and the autobiographical novels focus on the self, and thus make it possible for the writer to underline individual matters which – when contextualized – may readily send to social and political issues; (3) the revolt

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novel focuses on social and political issues which are highlighted through the medium of an individual, quite the opposite of the epistolary and the autobiographical novels, as the author goes from general to individual problems.

My approach has indeed enabled me to analyze the twentieth-century African-American novel from various angles; however the very title of my book – *Resistance and Protest in Selected Twentieth-Century African-American Novels: A New Perspective* – points out that there are limitations in my approach.

To include all the African American novels that deal with resistance and protest would have been much beyond the limits of a single book. Therefore, I have *selected* a limited number of novels which manage to show resistance and even protest to an unjust, harsh and sometimes cruel and shocking reality. In addition to this, the characters themselves and their actions are strong examples of resistance and sheer protest against the life they are forced to live in the evil times and society of the nineteenth and twentieth century America.

Dickson D. Bruce Jr., in his extensive study devoted to the origins of African-American literature, pushes the beginnings of African-American writing back to the late seventeenth century. I did not go that far in time and cover three centuries of African-American writing because the idea of this book, which is based on my dissertation, is to shed light on the period surrounding the Civil Rights Movement (i.e. novels written between the 1940s and the 1980s). This is one of the most significant periods of time in African American history and literature as it can definitely help the reader understand the African American's preoccupations and concerns as well as