

# The Role of African American Women in American Society (XIX-XX Centuries)

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## Abstract

The paper outlines the role, contribution and place of ethnic women minorities, namely, African American women, taking their race, religious and national backgrounds into consideration in XIX-XX century United States.

**Keywords:** African American women, American society, ethnic women minorities, XIX-XX centuries United States.

## Methods

- Quantitative research method
- Comparative research method
- Content-analyses

## Results

The role, place and contribution of African American women in the 19th and 20th centuries are accurately and clearly defined. The place and contributions are sorted and classified according to their social class, field of activity original and educational backgrounds.

## Introduction

Issues of ethnicity are prominent in the history of the United States. The USA is a multiethnic country. It is a thing of great importance to analyze the place and contribution of ethnic women minorities, namely: the place of African American women in XIX –XX century United States.

The first section of this article considers the role, objectives and problems of African American women. It then analyses extracts from the literature of African American women's autobiographical sources in order to realize and perceive their state and the problems they faced in everyday life. One of the primary elements of the research is studying the attitude of American society towards Afro-American women.

In order to do the research accurately, it is necessarily important to find out what place coloured women took in 19-20 century America was.

"Ethnicity," taken from the Greek word "ethnikos" meaning national, designates "any of the basic groups or divisions of mankind or as defined

in this book- Ethnic American Women, "a heterogeneous population as distinguished by customs, characteristics, language, common history and so forth. The "ethnicity" can be categorized by religion (Jews), by nationality (Basques), by religion and nationality (Irish Catholics), and by race (blacks), in addition to language factors and even by region, three tables of contents have been included". (Blicksilver, The Ethnic American Women, 1978, pp. 1-2)

It would be interesting to outline the role, contribution and place of ethnic women minorities, namely, contribution of African American women, taking their race, religious and national backgrounds into consideration. The first stage will serve as an analyzer of the approach and attitude of the American society towards African American women.

The first stage goes to considering the single cases of African American women who held various social statuses, had different educational backgrounds and made certain kind of contribution to the United States of America.

In the first half of nineteenth century American women changed from colonial goodwives to people with more modern concerns (Collins, America's Women 2003, 2003, p. 85). Beginning in the early weeks of the civil war, thousands of fugitive slaves or "contrabands" fled to Washington DC. The federal government responded by crowding the African-American men, women, and children into hastily prepared contraband camps that supplied insufficient food and clothing, had little or no sanitation and were breeding grounds for infectious diseases. As white charitable organizations struggled to organize themselves to assist the freed people.

"Elizabeth Keckley the dressmaker of First lady Mary Todd Lincoln, established a relief society run by the free African-American women of Washington". (Forbes, 1998, p. 85)

The first women whose history I have been interested

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in, is Elizabeth Keckley. "She was eager for the prosperous middle class African-American community to support the newly freed men and women. As a former slave who had worked hard to build a successful dressmaking business, she was concerned that white philanthropists and charity workers who underestimated the abilities and the potential of the formerly enslaved would undermine their efforts to elevate themselves. She knew from her own experience that it was possible for former slaves to care for themselves, find employment, and direct their own lives" (Collins, p.85, 2003). "*With forty African –American women from her church, Keckley Established the Contraband Relief Association (CRA). The CRA was by no means the first African-American relief society. During 1863, The CRA expanded its focus and changed its name to the "Ladies Freedman and Soldiers' Relief Association. As thousands of contraband men enlisted in all-black Union regiments in 1863, the CRA helped outfit the African-American soldiers just as white woman had supplied white soldiers through the soldiers' aid societies early in the war"* (Harper E. , African American women during the Civil War, 1988, 85).

According to Harper "a leading educator of the nineteenth century, Fanny Jackson Coppin was one of the first black women to receive a full-fledged collegiate education. "At a time when the vast majority of African Americans were illiterate, and when most free blacks in the North were struggling to obtain an elementary education, Jackson, a former slave was excelling in the most challenging courses at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. In the years following her graduation from Oberlin, Jackson became the first African-American woman to serve as a head principal of a school of higher education in the United States (Messerete, 2015)". At the same time, she was famous for her new teaching methods, her preparation of future teachers, and her contribution to establish industrial and vocational education for African-American men and women in Philadelphia" (Harper J. , Women during the Civil War, 2007, p. 50)

It sounds interesting that to some representatives of ethnic women minorities there was discrimination neither in receiving education nor in career development process. Despite having some obvious racism cases Jackson said she never faced obstacles at Oberlin. Later she added: "despite this incident of racism, Jackson always maintained that she was not hindered by racial discrimination or prejudice while at Oberlin. She later stated that "*Prejudice in Oberlin is preached against, prayed against, sung against, and lived against*" [quoted in Perkins 1987, 39]. However, in her memoirs, Fanny described her first experience she bumped into discrimination: "I had been so long in Oberlin that I had forgotten about my color, but I was sharply reminded of it when, in a storm of rain, a Philadelphia rain street car conductor forbid my entering a car that did not have on it for colored people, so I had to wait in the storm until one came in which colored people could ride" [Coppin 1995, 14] (Gorman, 2015) As it appears, discrimination was not an imaginative thing. It did exist but at the education institutions it was lack remarkable.

Jackson, however, was soon recognized as an outstanding teacher at the Institute, and in 1869, was appointed principal of the entire school. (Harper J. , Women during the Civil War, 2007, p. 94) "*During the 1880s while immersed*

*in her mission for industrial education, religion became more important. She was deeply involved in the African-American Methodist Episcopal church, and married an AME minister in 1881, the Reverend Levi J. Coppin. She became a leader in the Home and Foreign Missionary Society and served a number of terms as its president. Following her retirement from teaching in 1902, she became a missionary, traveling with her husband to South Africa. She died in Philadelphia in 1913"* (Harper H. , 2007, p. 94).

## Analysis

In order analyze it properly; the paper considers the situation among the artists from the perceptive of discrimination. Talking about discrimination of ethnic minorities, which includes religious, race and national persecution, we do not forget about gender discrimination cases. This was one of the most dangerous and sharp angle of the issue since, in addition to all difficulties mentioned above, they were persecuted by male competitors who tried to outline their dominance over women. There was a big need for the conflict resolution. Thereafter, that, gender issue became a topic of interest.

The Case of Edmonia Lewis deserves attention. "Lewis was the first African-American sculptor, male or female, to achieve success on an international scale. During the civil war, when she was launching her career, white women sculptors in the United States were just beginning to overcome the prejudice that prevented women from prospering as professional artists. For an African-American female sculptor to attain celebrity was an extraordinary accomplishment in an era when most artists were male and were struggling to earn a living. Lewis early works honored prominent male abolitionists. After settling in Rome, her sculptures celebrated the emancipation of African-Americans and portrayed figures from ancient history, the bible, mythology, and Native American culture. In the late January 1862, she became embroiled in a scandal that inflamed the college community, the town of Oberlin and the neighboring region". (Chernick, 2018) But things were not as simple as seemed since "*Lewis was accused of poisoning two girls with wine beverage. Although, the incident was not reported in the local newspapers for three weeks, rumors spread throughout Oberlin overnight, stirring racial animosity among whites. Days later white vigilantes abducted her. They forced her to accompany them to a neighboring field where they brutally beat her, leaving her battered body exposed to the bitter February cold. At the two-day hearing preliminary to her trial, the case was dismissed due to the absence of evidence*". (Harper J. , Women during the Civil War, 2007, p. 270)

It was hard for colored women to prove themselves. There was a kind of suspect surrounding all their possibilities and kind intentions. They were treated the way one can treat secondary sort production. They were always pointed at their colour of skin, and origins. Afro-Americans struggle was the hardest one ever, regardless their status of being a slave or not. A big majority of American society looked for their trace in everything bad happening around. But that was not the factor that could stop or pause the women of colour who struggled for proving themselves among the rest and show their skills and dedication to the people of the United

States.

Like most other sculptors of the mid-nineteenth century, Lewis was eager to study in Italy. By the summer of 1865, she had raised enough money to finance the journey. In 1867 to 1868, Lewis created the two-figured sculpture titled *Forever Free*, which memorialized the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, one of the first steps leading to the liberation of all enslaved African Americans. In 1876, Lewis shocked the American public with her sculpture *the Death of Cleopatra* (Harper J. , *Women During the Civil War*, 2007).

Lewis was a talented African American woman but unlike Copin she had some problems regarding her professional sphere of activity. She was a serious danger to male sculptors of that time in the United States. They tried to get rid of her like a rival from professional arena.

The Civil War paused a long period of change and innovation in education for males and females in the United States. *“The years 1830 to 1860 saw many new developments in elementary, secondary and collegiate instruction that had broad implications for the advancement of education for women. Despite the progress and the evidence that girls and women could master academic disciplines once reserved for males only, the belief that women intellects were inferior to men’s persisted. By the 1870s, the “new women’s” colleges and women’s increased presence in Co-educations College eventually began to shift public opinion”.*

It should be noted that “girls whose educational needs had been ignored in the past, were included in the North’s mass education plan. By the mid-nineteenth century, most people no longer quarreled with the idea that all girls needed grounding in the basis of education to become good mothers capable of guiding the next generation of citizens into adulthood”. (Harper E. , 2007, p. 144)

Female literacy rate was increased by expansion of the common schools in the North and West . *“By 1860, only six percent of all Northern women were literate in the South where communities were slower to install common schools, 15 percent of women were illiterate. Among free African Americans, who were excluded from most public education, only 50 percent were literate by 1860. Laws in most southern states prohibited the education of slaves, though a small number managed to learn to read and write. Historians approximate that literacy rates for slaves ranged from five to ten percent”* (Hobbs 1995, 11) (Harper., 2007, 145)

The most interesting thing is that *“by the time of the Civil War, many Americans believed that women were “born teachers” and were naturally superior to men as instructors of the young. Before the war, female teachers were restricted to teaching youngest pupils in the elementary grades. As male teacher left the classroom during the Civil War, however, women successfully taught older children, adding their credibility as excellent educators of all common schools’ students. From 1830 through the 1870, the most common secondary and higher education for girls and young women were private schools known as “female seminaries”. By the 1850s, Northern critics of the female seminaries in the North argued that their students, although taught most of the same subjects as young men, did not receive the same depth of*

*instruction as provided in the men’s colleges”.* (Harper E. , *Women during the Civil War*, 2007, 146-148).

According to Harper, family life was of very important to nineteenth century Americans of all races and social classes. “For white and African American families of the North and South, children were the focus of the family. Nineteenth-century white middle-class Americans looked upon the home as a refuge, a place where parents and children could reside together in safety and harmony, away from the pressing problems of the society at large. It was the role of the women of the family to cultivate the home so that it was a restful and pleasing place.” (Stevenson, 1988).

‘Charlotte Forten was one of the first African –American teachers from the North to join the Teachers of the Freed people in the south. She was also the only black teacher on St. Helena. Island, part of the Port Royal experiment. She was the member of one of the most prestigious abolitionist families in Philadelphia. After graduating from the Salem Normal school in 1856, Forten became the first black teacher hired to teach in the public schools of Salem. Throughout the rest of the 1850s, she repeatedly tried to launch a career in education, but her attempts were interrupted by lengthy bouts of serious illness. As she expresses in her journal on August 17, 1862, she hoped that by going to the Sea Island, she would find herself filled with the purpose” (Maillard, 2013, pp. 265-271).

“African –American abolitionist, civil right activist, and millionaire entrepreneur Mary Ellen Pleasant lived most of her adult life in San-Francisco, California. From the Gold Rush of the early 1850s until the 1890s, Pleasant amassed a fortune by operating her business and investing in real estate and mineral mines. Once Pleasant arrived in San Francisco in the early 1850s, she immediately opened several businesses, operating a number of commercial laundries while working as a housekeeper and late, as a cook. By the Late 1850s, the Pleasants were leaders in San Francisco’s African-American community. Well known for her philanthropy, Pleasant donated funds to help create the 800-volume library at San Francisco Athanaeum Institute, a club for African-American men” (Harper J. E., 2007, p. 338).

As Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, Pleasant protested segregation and discrimination cases in public transport. Despite the thing that the judge, in 1864, recognized tram segregation illegal, the law was not in force. Tram drivers did not allow the people of colour to use the transport.

“In 1866, Pleasant sued two transit companies, one for ejecting her from a streetcar and the other for a driver’s refusal to accept her as a passenger. In 1867, a jury awarded her 500\$ in punitive damages as compensation for the company’s refusal to allow her to ride but in 1868 the California Supreme court ruled that the damages in the 1867 case were excessive since there was no proof of injury or other special damage. Although Pleasant lost what the district court had awarded her, the case set an important precedent, confirming that African Americans had the right to equal access to public transportation” (Sterling, 1984, p. 176).

According to Harper, in the 1870s, Pleasant reached the plateau of her success as an entrepreneur, with holdings

amounting to at least \$1 million and probably exceeding that amount more than once over (Sterling, "Women with a Special Mission". We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century., 1984, p. 176).

Far away from the US, the African-American abolitionist Sarah Remond Parker during the Civil War years worked to eradicate slavery and to ensure the defeat of the Confederacy. "Her abolitionist speeches, delivered throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland, helped to awaken the British public to the evils of slavery in the United States. Remond and other Northern abolitionist just as urgently tried to persuade middle-and working-class British men and women to support the Union and to oppose slavery in the United States. Her oratory, and that of her fellow abolitionists-both American and British-helped to sway public opinion to support the Union".

American -born Sarah Parker Remond was a member of a distinguished, well off African-American Family that was actively involved in the abolitionist movement. "The Remond home was an important gathering place for black and white abolitionist leaders. Early in January 1859, Remond arrived in Liverpool, England, and immediately began educating the British people about slavery in the United States. From her first public appearance, audiences thronged to hear her, partly out of curiosity to see an African-American women lecture. By 1867 Remond had returned to England, primarily because she found relief from the racial hatred so that disturbed her in the United States. She ultimately settled in Florence, where she married and studied and practiced medicine. She remained abroad for the rest of her life". (Harper E. , 2007, pp. 353-355).

Diaries played a huge role in the Civil War years. "It stimulated more women and men to keep diaries than any other single event in American history. Unlike diaries writing, since the late nineteenth century, most early-and mid-nineteenth-century women did not view their journals as a means to commune with their innermost thoughts. The diaries were primarily, a record of their activities that they later shared with family and close friends. But as the civil war progressed, some women discovered that their diaries evolved into a form that transcended a mere accounting of their days; they became anchors in crisis, receptacle for overpowering emotions, and helpful reminders that they had survived devastating losses and could endure additional pain and suffering. Of all the diaries and journals written by female teachers in the Port Royal Experiment, Forten's is the most compelling in terms of the frank discussion of her emotions and perceptions of the island and its people. While other teacher's letters and diaries focus on describing the outer world they confronted, Forte's dialogue with her inner self-her fears, loneliness, and empathy for the freed people coupled with her emotional reactions to the strangeness of their culture-provides insight to what a sensitive, caring young woman experienced in educating the formerly enslaved" (Harper E. , Women during the Civil War, 2007, pp. 114-115; 172).

One of the most distinguished African-American poets and writers of the nineteenth century; Frances Watkins Harper began her career as a social reformist as an abolitionist orator in 1854. "As the national conflict over slavery

heightened during the Civil War despite desperate personal circumstances, she traveled from city to city hammering home to her audiences her political message that the mission of the war was not just to abolish slavery, but to make a place for the freed people in American society. Watkins became a teacher in Ohio in 1850. After relocating to Pennsylvania in 1853. She involved herself in the abolitionist movement becoming an antislavery orator, poet and writer in 1854. In 1860, after more than six years on the lecture circuit, Watkins was exhausted from being on the road and was longing for a family life. In November of that year she married Fenton Harper, a free black man and father of three children. As an orator, few women speakers either before or during the war were considered the equal of Watkins Harper. As in the late 1850s, many of her Civil War speeches were read by abolitionists all over the North and Midwest. The Liberator, the National Antislavery Standard, the Anti-slavery Bugle (Ohio) and the African-American newspapers the Christian Recorder and the Anglo-African Magazine regularly published her lectures" (Harper E. , Women during the Civil War, 2007, p. 212). "She also advocated women's rights. During the late 1860s and for the rest of the century, she devoted herself to her writing, and to the causes of woman suffrage, African-American civil rights, and international peace. She helped form the National Association of Colored Women and served for a time as its vice president" (Harper E. , African American women during the Civil War, 1988, 85).

To have quite a full and distinct picture of the place of ethnic women minorities in 19-20 century American society, I suppose to analyze autobiographical extracts and literature sketches which will be able to show the being of Afro-American women and the attitude of the society towards them.

Poetry goes first, since it has a locomotive function. It describes kind of emotions that are unhidden in each single line. Each line is distinguished with hopelessness, disappointment, ache which is directly attached to immigrants' lives. The verse outlines the fact of looking for something that does not exist. The author says that one is ill at ease at finding a place overseas. Setting a precedent does not mean it is going to be repeated once or more times. The bird is associated with an immigrant's life, newcomer, and a person living on foreign lands who, with all in his power, tries to prove himself. Sometimes the result is reached, sometimes not. The verse is totally pessimistic for a person who made a huge step- dared to live on others' land.

The poetry of African American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks is distinguished by her specific style of telling truth in a literature way:

African-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks:

*"This juice from tomatoes is not called merely juice. It is always called tomato juice. If you go in to a restaurant desiring tomato juice you do not order the waiter to bring you "juice"; you request, distinctly, TOMATO juice. The juice from cranberries is called cranberry juice. The juice from oranges are called orange juice. The [writing] from Black [writers] is called Black [writing]." (Blicksilver, The ethnic American Women, 1978 , p. 281)*

The society, namely, American society is a multicultural phenomenon. It is like an orchard which gathers all fruits together. But we do know the name for each single fruit.

This is the way Gwendolyn Brooks looks at the society where immigrants leave. According to Brooks, when one says a word "American" he has to be a bit more specific which American he means. Brooks sees no wrong in that. An African American cannot be a native American, the latter cannot be transformed into a Mexican American. The author appreciates each group's advantages and talent. She thinks the very differences make them distinguished and important. The main accents are made on the people of colour (based on her own origins and historical background) where black women writers are in the limelight who, according to her, were always distinguished from the rest. In addition, the verse considers the topic of interest which outlines the personal attitude and viewpoint of Gwendolyn towards ethnic issues. Brooks focuses not just on ordinary fruits: an apple, pear, melon or some vegetables like tomatoes, cabbage or carrot, but a berry (a cranberry), fruit (an orange) and vegetables (a tomato) which are differed from each other by the way they are cultivated, planted and taken care of. This is the sight from Brooks' window and the way she is looking at American society and the ethnic minority it consists of.

Simultaneously, the most interesting thing is that Brooks chosen kind of fruits (cranberry, orange, tomato) that can serve as a glass of juice. Thereafter, the outcome is one and the same thing for all of them.

But the fact is still not able to be changed: there is a glass of tomato juice, a glass of cranberry juice and an orange juice, the taste of which have nothing in common with each other. According to the author, this is how African American literature looks like which is radically different from the rest and the one which is well associated with tomatoes.

In the very case we are facing a philosophical idea which is, consciously or subconsciously, associated with tomato juice. Brooks selects tomato deliberately (blood associations) in order to show African American literature and their being. Whether we are able to look for cranberries and oranges in an orchard, the vegetables must be searched in a vegetable garden. This is the way how the poet develops deep psychological ideas using direct and indirect ways simultaneously to have a talk with above-mentioned society. She is having a conversation with the society she belongs to. Gwendolyn, loudly announces, to the cranberry and orange societies that she is a proud representative of the other group-she is a tomato.

Blacksilver says: „Hopefully, now ethnic children, girls as well as boys, are able to tell about their painful or joyful experiences as they search for their unique identity and as they explore the world beyond their classroom and community. We must give all children, especially those of ethnic origins who have unhappy memories associated with their cultural lifestyles, the opportunity to express themselves freely, to speak for themselves. Proud ethnic American children should never feel that their cultural past is imprisoned in Anglos history or that their only future is as invisible swimmers in the American mainstream" (Blacksilver, *The ethnic American Women*, 1978 , p. 353)

Edith Blacksilver who is an author of the book "*Ethnic American Women*" expresses views and destinies of the people of different ethnic backgrounds. The book unifies the literature works of the women minorities of various ethnic origins which perfectly expresses the feedback between the women and society, the issue of their acceptance and non-acceptance case.

## Conclusion

The paper considered the life and contribution of African American women in different specters and areas of activity.

The women mentioned in the article, according to the examples studied, belonged to different:

- social class
- communities,
- profession and interests

This helped us form a distinct picture of their roles and contributions to American society:

Seamstress Keckley's invaluable activities starting from founding the charity organization CRA went on with giving a hand to African American men fighting for freedom in the Civil War. Her place in American society is obvious. She was accepted since she was able to get rid of the slavery reaching the White House as a tailor. Despite having no higher education, she could become a designer within the framework of which she created a number of dresses for the first lady. This was the place she gained and the attitude she got instead.

As to the noble African American teachers such as Coppin and Forten they did not see any kind of discrimination in educational system. However, behind the doorstep of the university, they had to overcome some difficulties. Based on the fact that education leads to a different level of development, it is logical that the circle of the educated people is less likely to take into account the color of skin, the origin or the nationality to assess the talents of an individual. So, that's why the first became a distinguished teacher and then the manager of the institution, and the latter - the teacher of the public school of Salem. As to the life out of the university, discrimination was particularly acute because of the low level of education in the middle class.

The population mainly consisted of middle and lower classes which was the very majority, the opinion of which the state took into consideration in order to create the laws most comfortable for them. ("*Jim Crow Laws*"). It should be noted that, in contrast to educational institutions, art fields were quite discriminatory, which is proved by the set of examples of Edmonia Lewis. The first Afro-American sculptor Lewis, who created many masterpieces, suffered constant discrimination, the discriminatory status can be doubled. Louise's problem was not only because of its black color of skin, but also because she of being a woman, since at that time males were dominated by femlaes. It is noteworthy how women from ethnic minorities tried to establish themselves in the American society and how relevant their feedback was.

As I mentioned above, the contribution and place of ethnic women minorities in the United States was not limited to one particular category or sub-category.

The study showed that the absence of higher education did not interfere with Keckley's to do the good deeds, having highest level of education and being a member of the prestigious abolitionist family was not an obstacle for Forten to become the first African American woman on St. Helen's island. Fear of discrimination could not stop Lewis. A human rights advocate, millionaire philanthropist, entrepreneur Pleasant was added to the list of the seamstress, teacher and sculptor.

Thus, the study showed that despite the different types of discrimination and harassment, ethnic women minorities, living in America, tirelessly worked to establish a place in society and, at great efforts, achieved their goal. This action served as an example to others which defined their future - they were able to establish a decent place in American society.

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