

The Aesthetics of Blackness and Feminist Signification in the Selected Novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker

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Abstract

One of the dominant themes which continue to resonate in literature irrespective of region, culture or period is the perceived marginalization of the female gender. Many critics have observed that the level and perception of such a gender marginalization differs according to the socio-cultural milieu of a given area. As such, theories with the consciousness of cultural factors have continued to emerge as appropriate responses to gender politics. In African-American fictions, evidence of cultural practices which are believed to enforce women's subservience abounded. The selected texts of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker provide an appropriate illustration of some practices which continue to subjugate the African-American women and promote male dominance. It is observable that certain socio-economic and class factors constitute the restrictive practices which contribute to the oppression of African-American woman. The primary aim of this study is to bring under critical focus the dominant influence of sexism in the Black aesthetics of African-American women writers. It also further contextualizes how African-American women have continued to perceive and react to their plight after many centuries of physical and spiritual estrangement from their African homeland.

Introduction

This study critically investigates the politics of gender main streaming in African-America with a specific emphasis on the selected novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Between literature and feminist ideology, there is such a seamless boundary that significant generic differences are only at the levels of disciplinary approaches. African-American women writers have followed with concern the trajectory of American history and politics redefining the role of women in a way that appropriates and positions gender issue for a broader national discourse. The core argument in the paper is that African-American literature is historically and traditionally male-dominated. Prior to feminist movement in Europe and America, women voices were not given adequate attention. Many female writers in the Victorian England had to veil their identity by adopting male pseudonyms for their work to gain recognition. Even women who actively participated in the struggle for the abolition of slave trade and contributed immensely in various Black movements were ignored on account that the literary landscape is male-driven (Isah 2011, 4).

Against the backdrop of the negative images, writers have taken up the struggle for the elevation and recognition of women. Feminist theory, therefore, responds to women's experiences and offers the possibilities of ideological transformation. Through

fictional narrative texts, the paper proceeds to analyse Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Alice Walker's *Color purple*. By studying the novels of these writers as representative of female voices in African-American society, the work re-appraises African-American experience from the female perspective to uncover gender agitation. The paper studies the literary activity of Black female writers and shows how their novels contest the place of the Black male within the tradition of African-American.

African-American Literary Tradition

African-American literature is a corpus of literary texts produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The thematic preoccupations involve issues like the roles of African-Americans within the larger American society. The themes also include African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equity among others. This literature emerged from the oral tradition of African slaves in America. It encompasses forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues and raps. Disappointed by the failure of integration but inspired by the philosophy of cultural nationalism as the means to achieve liberation in contrast to the veneration of Western ideals, African-American literature emphasized the African cultural past as the true heritage of the African-Americans. This acknowledgement and appreciation of that heritage is a major tenet of the genre. Writers and poets such as Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Harlem renaissance writers like Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, Claude McKay, and Zora Naele Hurston, to mention a few, drew inspiration from African oral tradition.

Some of the early African-American writers include Jupiter Hammon, who was considered the first African-American writer to have his work published under the title *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries* (1761). Others are William Wells Brown and Victor Sejour who wrote *Le Mulatre (The Mulatto)* in 1837. Some of the earliest fictions of African-American writers include Williams Wells Brown's *Clootel, or The President's Daughter* (1953), Fredrick Douglass is best known for His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845) and other slave narratives. These works became the mainstay of African-American literature as they influenced other African-Americans in their effort to write. One important milestone of the African-American literary development is the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance as cited in Isah (2011:5) involves:

a vigorous unprecedeted artistic outburst of creative activity by and for African Americans that occurred in the United States from 1920s to the 1930s in all fields of art, but is best known for the literature that came out of it... a larger flowering of social thought and culture that started as the New Negro Movement in form of series of literary discussion which had a considerable impact on today's literature.

Prior to the renaissance period, works of African-Americans were primarily read by the Blacks. With the renaissance, however, African-American literature, art, and performance became popular within the mainstream of American culture. Black aesthetics instituted a positive Black identity and created a new race consciousness that proved valuable to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Some of the prominent works of Harlem Renaissance include Alain Locke's *Nigger Heaven* (1926²), Zora's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* among others. The values set for the Black community during the Renaissance were the basis for the ideological goals that greatly inspired the cause of the Civil Rights Movement

later in the 20th century. The Civil Rights Movement also made a powerful impression on Black writers during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Just as the Black activists were pursuing the termination of racial segregation, so were the Black writers through their works. The Civil Rights Movement largely induced Black Art Movement and contributed immensely to social freedom. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) and Ralph Ellison's *Go Tell it to the Mountain* (1953) represent a classical expression of this concern.

With the termination of racial segregation enforced by the Civil Rights legislations of the 1960s, White institutions of higher learning in the United States developed interest in Black studies. A number of Black related issues were introduced in the schools' curricula. Some of the programmes that assumed scholarly interest include Black culture, experiences and contributions to the larger African-American community. Thus, the entrenchment of African-American literature made literary materials produced by African-American writers accessible to a larger society. The Civil Rights era gave rise to the African-American literature of the 1960s and the rise of Black female writings. This effort shows marked differences from the repression and agitation of the past and ushering in the age literary innovation and freedom.

Theoretical Conceptualization

Feminism is an essentially extrinsic literary theory that negates the art for art's sake conception of literature. Feminism in literature is an extension of feminist discourse as a theory. It aims at uncovering the nature of gender inequality and feminist politics. The dominant themes explored include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression of women, and patriarchy. The emergence of texts from the view points of gender became an important feature of feminist literary discourse. The feminist critics argue that the notion of authority as the legitimized masculine concept in the ownership of texts places the author as the father image. It is therefore argued that if the author is the father and owner of a text, he is also in control of his readers' attention. He is the owner and possessor of the subjects of his text and controls all his images, the woman inclusive. Thus, women are made to conform to the male standards in such texts. Female writers are also forced to identify with men and male standard of writing and constantly reminded of 'being' female writers. This therefore deprives them of the power of literary discourse which has been given universal parameters by male writers.

The feminist writers fight against being the "other" and "outsider" in the literary tradition. To them, exclusion from a literature that claims to define their identity, but goes contrary, is to experience a sort of powerlessness. In an attempt to make sure that a literary text does not insist on their universality, left alone define it in specifically male terms, the feminists repudiate the universality of these structures by reading against their own logic of foundation and become resistant readers to the deliberately created illusions and imposed meanings (Isah 2011. 6). The feminists believe that once the structure of the text is deconstructed, its universality inevitably disappears as in such reading the dominating presence of any central meaning fades into absence. That does not however mean that the feminist readers read outside the theoretical discourses, but the feminist provides a totally different point of departure from reading as a man. But by working within that discourse the feminist resists the seemingly falsified perspective of the male reader.

By focusing on the neglected or suppressed elements of the text, the feminists subvert the centre of male domination in their discourses. Their literary text also subverts the dominant male vision as the only viable vision of reality and displaces male perception as the only perception with universal parameters. These are the tenets of the feminist theory. Feminists seek to make women's writings appreciable by promoting certain concepts that are fundamental to the convention of gender, especially the female gender, and examine how such perception limit the woman's possibilities within established social settings. Gynocritics examine the extent of inequality that women experience in societies within which they live with men. They made bare how social formations systematically oppress women in a bid to create equality within the society. They bring to limelight the achievements and contributions of women to their society and to remove all gender based distortions which appear in texts of philosophy, literature, and science, and to redress some societal stereotypes that featured for many years.

Feminist Signification in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

According to Harkins (2001. 13) Toni Morrison, author of seven novels and a volume of literary essays, is the first African-American to have won the Nobel Prize for literature in the 1993. Her works largely explore the lives of black people and their communities and celebrate the unique richness of black language and culture. The style of her story telling spontaneously draws her readers into major themes that weave themselves throughout her novels, including issues of identity, racism, sexism, spirituality, and African-American folk traditions. As one of the most influential and famous writers of the late twentieth century, Morrison has written novels that gave voice to what it means to be women, black and American.

Morrison's *Paradise* depicts conflicts in Ruby, a town founded in 1950 by a group of 8-Rock Black family. It is a Convent and a single building surrounded by plains and rolling hills. Due to the incessant attacks by a number of racist forces, the 8-Rock Black family relocates from Haven, a Cosy town founded by their fathers in 1980, to Ruby, Oklahoma. It is quite unfortunate that the founding fathers of Ruby, in an attempt to escape from the hostile and oppressive White community that plagued their forefathers, on founding Ruby turned out to be worst oppressors visiting their anger on innocent women who, being wounded at various moments by elements of life, take refuge in the Convent.

The Convent women whose age ranged from sixteen to seventy offer care, love, and convivial environment based on mutual respect to every woman that found solace there. The novel employs Bellie Delia, a historian as the narrator. Morrison clearly identifies herself with the Convent community. She describes Ruby as "a place where you can stay for a while. "You can collect yourself and think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. Morrison further depicts the Convent as a place where "They'll take care of you or leave you alone which ever way you want it." (309)

Morrison views Ruby as a town and culture with a tightly woven patriarchal structure that seriously limits the possibilities for change. Though the patriarchs attempted to put into practice the ideals of participatory democracy and non-violence reminiscent to the Civil Rights period, the attempt remained seriously flawed in its exclusion of women. In Ruby women are excluded day in day out in all matters that affect them in their common life. The women are denied a voice and remained

possessions of men that must be negotiated. Although the men talk about the influence of women, the men essentially silence and exclude the women from negotiations and decisions.

Morrison foregrounds this exclusion when, after a prayer meeting session, the men are said to hear “the tippy-tap steps of women who are no where to be seen” (61). This is emblematic of the Civil Rights Movements when the officers of the leading organization where male African American ministers who did not allow women into their ranks of the leading organization were male African-American ministers who did not allow women into their ranks to function even though women were not only very active but also highly influential within the day to day running of the organization as well as in setting the agenda for the movement, and in constructing a model of participatory democracy. The town patriarchs consolidate their power through an unspoken but extremely tight control over women. As Pat recognizes, “everything that worries them must come from women” in that “the generations had to be not only racially untampered but free of adultery too” (217). Morrison, however, positioned the Convent as the best hope for moving past racism and patriarchy.

The Convent symbolized an interrelated, non-hierarchical form of justice, to emphasized coalition and community; coalition in the sense of joining forces to strive for specific goals, and community in the sense of communitarian space. Morrison explores the interdependence of coalition and community as means of configuring a communal form of agency. The Convent provides a space that not only ensures temporary survival to all those who find their way there regardless of race, class or history, but also validates ordinary women and their stories to the extent that collectively they can construct certain positions for themselves that include position other than subjugation.

As things are in Ruby, unwanted children are conceived and aborted, wished-for children are born “broken” (Mongoloids) and the young begin to react against the conservative lifestyle and authoritarian politics of the community’s leading elders. The community’s patriarchs reacted to this development by launching series of angry accusations against its young male lions for failing their ancestral responsibility. The Convent women are held responsible for all that befell Ruby. These culminate in a horrific massacre of the women by these two groups of men on that ground. The men resort to violence to rid the Convent of its women residents not only because they see the women as “impure” and “unholy”, but mainly “because they could … which is what begin an 8-rock meant to them. “The patriarchs’ suspicion and fear of the women is also a function of their desire to retain control over their separatist enclave that is Ruby, Morrison satires this action of theirs by the portrayal of the weaponry they carry on the raid of the Convent:

They are nine, over twice the number of the women is obliged to stamp or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns (3).

This preparation is just to oust five unarmed women, whose only fault is that they have chosen their fellow women for company, and deliberately abstain from sexual relations with men and thus forgo reproduction. It is indeed an absurdity the men failed to recognize. Bellie Delia, in response to such action called the town of Ruby:

A town that had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded in swallowing her mother and almost broken her own self. A backward no place ruled

by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the never to say who not and where ... (308)

Then patriarchal and racist separatism that grounds Ruby's identity allows for no other response than hatred and violence. Morrison further depicts Ruby as a place which has no room for unmarried "women who choose themselves for company" (276) and a town in which women's "identity rested on the men they married" (187). After the massacre at the Convent, the Convent women continue to embody hope. The disappearance of the women's bodies function as a rejections of conventional closure and refusal to be co-opted. They will not neatly and properly be buried within the patriarchal enclosure of Ruby. Moreover, that their bodies are some where "out there" imbues the Convent women with a mythical power that provides hope. As stated in the text Bellie Delia had another question. "when will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town ..." (188)

The disappearance of the murdered bodies positions the Convent women as indestructible in the sense that their engagement in such a dynamic, alternative collation process grounded in caring and interesting subject position in conflict with the patriarchal status quo. Morison's preference for the Convent women is also seen in her depiction of the men of Ruby and the massacre. The men assert that everybody who goes near them (the Convent women) is maimed somehow, and "the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families" (276). In order to justify their violent actions, they dehumanized and demonized the Convent women as "female malice" (4) "incarnate" "strays" (114) "bitches more like witches," "heifers" and "sluts" (273). The Convent in important ways functions as Morrison's ideal alternative. Why? Because at the conclusion of Paradise there is a continuing challenge at patriarchal structures and the threats of violence towards women that ensures the survival of such structures.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker (1982) is another story on the plight of women. Spanning the two world wars, the story features Celie a child-wife betrothed to Albert an old violent drunk who only marries her not because he wants a relationship but to raise his kids and fix things up in the house. Celie becomes suitable for "Mr" (as she calls Albert) because though "shy ugly... But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean and God fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (9). This being the foundation on which Celie's marriage to 'Mr' is based it yields nothing misery, exploitation and all manner of domestic violence. Being repeatedly raped by her step father at home right from age 14 and having the children sold out, Celie is handed over to Albert for further exploitation. It is worthy of note that the men in *The Color Purple* are weak individuals but the power of patriarchy makes them strong and enables them to oppress the female characters.

Writing several letters to God and Nattie is a sort of life line and the only Solace to Celie. The women of her era live in a period reminiscent to the days of slavery they live a life filled with misery, being treated by their own husbands and White people around as inferior and do nothing about their condition. *The Color Purple* focuses on Celie alone as a point of reference. Her liberation afterwards comes through a group of women. Sophia, Shrug, and Nattie who decongest the notion that, "Wives are like children. You have to let them know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (37). This empowerment comes through when Sophia Celie to stand and fight back for her right as does Sophia to her husband Harpo, and to the

Mayor her social emancipation manifests when she jilts Albert for a fellow woman Shug, and with Shug comes the discovery of her sister Nattie's lost letters, their re-union and subsequent discovery of her father's legacy and the growth of her business. Celie's liberation leads to not merely sewing pants for sale but wearing them, an act solely that is male's preserve in that era. With this attainment Celie discovers herself worth, becomes bold enough to call her husband by his name instead of "Mr" and even calls him a low-down dog. Albert's attitude towards Celie as well as other women changes: he tells her "took me long enough to notice you such good company" (275). In the novel Walker depicts a struggle that works": Shug makes it by singing, Nattie by being a missionary, Sophia rejects subjugation by fighting back, and Celie through sewing and selling pants. In the novel, Alice Walker illustrates the abuse, neglect and oppression that a Black woman goes through and illustrates the need to fight back in order to regain self esteem and confidence lost way back.(Henry and Nellie 2011.56)

Conclusion

A critical study of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's works reveals the distinct emphasis placed on woman in their role as mother and as heads of their families. The stories are told primarily from the point of view of women featuring different spheres of women's experiences, different classes and personal backgrounds. It depicts an array of powerful African -American women consoling and creating a communal space for each woman to construct her identity. The women are distinguished by their toughness, resilience and fortitude; character traits which serve as fortification in their struggle to ensure that Black family's stability is portrayed. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are pre-occupied largely with portraying the complexity and vitality of Black female experience. Their writings refute stereotypical images of Black woman and show a concern for painting a faithful female perspective of Black female reality which had been inadequately treated in Black male writings. The work represents an appraisal of the aforementioned; the feminist literary tradition, being a relevant theory, is used as an analytical tool. Materials from library and the internet are used to buttress arguments raised by the primary sources depicting women inadequately portrayed. As a summation, the work achieves its aim of adding a voice to the plight of African -American women.

In *The Color Purple* (1982) walker brought together many of the characters and themes of her previous works. Peter S. Prescott in *Newsweek* proclaims *The Color Purple* "an American novel as a series of letters written by a Southern black woman (Celie), reflecting a history of oppression and abuse suffered at the hands of men. The book is praised for its masterful recreation of the Black fold speech. In the sane vein a critic, Robert Towers, comments in the *New York Review of Books* that "Walker convert Celie's sub-literate dialect in to a medium of remarkable expressiveness, color, and poignancy". He adds: "I find it impossible to imagine Celie apart from her language; through it, not only was a memorable and infinitely touching character but a whole submerged world is vividly called in to being". More than Walker's other works *The Color Purple* shows that even the most oppressed can liberate herself. The novel completes the cycle Walker announced ago in her essays. *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* about the survival and liberation of Black women through the strength and wisdom of others. Jeanne Fox-Aison in the *Chicago Tribune Book World* calls Walkers "a provocative writer who writes about Blacks in particular, but all humanity in general".(Justin 2007.8)

The common area of criticism in Walker's work, however, is her portrayal of Black men as violent. On the plight of Black women in the United States Baldwin affirms that it is a complex fate to be an Afro-American, not to talk of being an Afro-American woman. As a Black she suffers racism, as a female she suffers sexism. And an American society is stratified into economically determined classes, another level at which the black woman is oppressed can be identified as class. This constitutes a triple oppression. The trauma and violation of the African-American women assumes a cultural dimension in Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's works. The works represent the prototype of the racial and spiritual ambiguities in the African American community. The authors reveal the painful restriction in the lives of women who are conditioned by the sex-determined role the society prescribes for them as appendages to men. It appears that suffering has ultimately equipped the African American women with a certain strength and determination that sustain them in the struggle for gender equity and racial justice (Emenyi 2004. 36). Toni Morrison and Alice Walker reflect the cultural practices and attitude of their time. These cultural assumptions include attitudes toward women status, roles and expectations. They portray female characters as embodiments of subversive sexuality. Against this backdrop, their works reject a hegemonic conceptualization of women by male writers who they view as representative voices for African-American women. In this study of African-American literature, gender discrimination is approached from the perspective of feminist theory. The paper critically examines the major contributory factors to the denial of self determination of women.

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