

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS OF BLACK WOMEN IN AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE



Literature

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Neerja Sachdev

Associate Professor, Department of English
S.S.K.Girls' Degree, College, Allahabad, India.

Abstract

“Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they (women) act and do things accordingly.” Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Are Watching God*. A study of feminism is important today as that now the atmosphere for writings by women is overflowing. We see many women writers establishing themselves on the literary sky worldwide. The abundance of literature coincides with societal changes and fittingly, the modern woman has overcome numerous obstacles to achieve placement within a patriarchal society. This feat is miraculous for African American women or especially for women of color whose battle is mirrored by sexism, racism and classism. This puts black women in a privileged position to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter hegemony.

Introduction

Black Feminism seems to integrate the past and present, individual and community, personal and political change into a unified whole. Universality does not exist even in among women because although there certainly is something common in white and black women but it is totally different to be 'black' and 'female'. This double marginalization that is implied by being a black woman has called for a feminist theory that seeks to explore representations of black women's lives through techniques of analysis which suspend the variables of race, class and gender in mutually interrogative relation.

I will depict an analysis of the literary works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, which share commonalities derived from cultural and societal roots of their lives struggles as expressed by the fictitious characters in their works as well as points of conflicts derived from the writer's personal experiences. A discourse on the struggles of African American women exists in axis with discourse on the formation of female identity which tends to open that tradition to black women's feminist voices as well as to transforming spiritual power of their vision. Bell Hooks in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* states that:

My awareness of feminist struggle was stimulated by social circumstance. Growing up in a Southern, black, father dominated, working class household, I experienced (as did my mother, my sisters, and my brother) varying degrees of patriarchal tyranny and it made me angry- it made dominance and enabled me to resist sexist socialization. Frequently White feminist act as if black women did not know sexist oppression existed until they voiced feminist sentiment. They believe they are providing black woman with “the” analysis and “the” program for liberation. They do not understand, cannot even imagine, that black women, as well as other groups of women who live

daily in oppressive situations, often acquire an awareness often patriarchal politics from their lived experience, just as they develop strategies for resistance (even though they may not resist on a sustained or a organized basis (Hooks, 10)

As we burrow deeper into the 21st century, Author Alice Walker definitive label for womanish Black women from all walks of life, 'Womanist' has grown in stature and bittersweet meaning. For it was Alice Walker who said, "Womanist is to feminist what lavender is to purple".

This paper is an introduction to (just some) of the great womanist women of Black Women's literature who give props to these bold, brave and brazen big-hearted mother-women. Widely used yet rarely defined, Black Womanist feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black Women's reality by those who live it. Before exploring the contours and implications of this in the works of Black writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Taylor, Zadie Smith, TerryMacmillan: the modernist Womanist in 2001, Sister Souljeh, the Womanist writer of the Hip Hop revolution we must understand the core themes of a Black women's stand point.

One core theme is a legacy of struggle. Black women's vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, or the street, and at home has stimulated Black Women's independence and self-reliance.

Secondly, being 'Black' and 'Female' may expose African-American women to certain common experiences. This connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of all African-American women persuades the work of Black women's activists and scholars. Thirdly, Black women's ability to forge these individual unarticulated yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective stand point is a key to Black Women's survival. One fundamental feature of this struggle for a self-defined stand point involves tapping sources everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in white, male-controlled institutions. For Black women, the struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously Afrocentric and feminist. Research in African-American Studies that an Afrocentric worldview exists which is distinct from and in many ways opposed to a Eurocentric worldview (Okanlawon 1972; Asante 1987; Myers 1988). We can also say that being Black encompasses both experiencing white domination and individual and group valuation of an independent, long-standing Afro-centric consciousness.

African-American women draw on this Afrocentric worldview to cope with racial oppression. But far too often Black women's Afrocentric consciousness remains unarticulated and not fully developed into a self-defined standpoint. In societies that denigrate African ideas and peoples, the process of valuing an Afrocentric worldview is the result of self-conscious struggle. Now the point is that self-conscious struggle is needed in order to reject patriarchal perceptions of women and to value women's ideas and actions. The fact that more women than men identify themselves as feminists reflects women's greater experience with the greater experience with the negative consequences of gender oppression. Becoming a feminist is routinely described by

women (and men) as a process of transformation, of struggling to develop new interpretations of familiar realities. Women do share common experiences, but the experiences are not generally the same type as those affecting racial and ethnic groups (King 1998). Thus while expressions of race and genders are both socially constructed, they are not constructed in the same way. The struggle for Afrocentric feminist consciousness requires embracing both an Afrocentric worldview and a feminist sensibility and using both to forge a self-defined standpoint.

One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are suppressed is that self-defined standpoint can stimulate resistance. The interdependence of thought and action suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed action. In this regards, Patrice L. Dickerson, an astute Black feminist college student, who writes:

...it is fundamental contention of mine that in a social context which denies and deforms a person's capacity to realize herself, the problem of practice.... the demand to end a deficient consciousness must be to joined to a demand to eliminate the conditions which caused it. (personal communication, 1988)

The struggle for a self-defined Afrocentric feminist consciousness occurs through a merger of thought and action.

Black women writers have been concerned with expressing what constitutes a Black woman's reality. The simplistic notions that there is one reality, is constantly refuted by Black women writers. They rejected the notion that literature is supplemental to prior givens that the universal element is the only criterion for evaluating a work. The literature of the Black women was known as invisible till recently. This reveals the truth about a society that is controlled and repressed by the majority and their literature 'creates' the truth for society's 'other', the Black woman. From Phyllis Wheatly's slave narrative in the eighteen century to Toni Morrison's novel *Home* (2012), one sees pictures of the Black women who sustained and continue to sustain the emancipation of their people

Black women's literature contains many examples of how Black women are empowered by a changed consciousness. Barbara Christian maintains that the heroines of 1940s Black women's literature, such as Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Sreet* (1946) and Cleo Judson in Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy* (1948), are defeated not only by social reality but by their "lack of self-knowledge." In contrast, the heroines from the 1950s to the present represent a significant shift towards self-knowledge as spheres of freedom. Christian dates the shift Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) and claims, "because Maud Martha constructs her own standards, she manages to transform that 'little life' into so much more despite the limits set on her.... [she] emerges neither crushed nor triumphant" (1985, 176).

Historically, the Black woman has been the central figure in the Abolitionist and Emancipation Movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Evans in *Personal Politics* states that “twice in the history of the United States the struggle for racial equality has been mid-wife to a feminist movement - in the abolition movement of the 1830s and again in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (Evans, 24). Angela Davis in *Race, Sex, Class* traces the history of the Black woman from slavery to the present. She outlines how the Black woman was denied her femaleness in race issues and denied her blackness in sex issues. Both these indices were critical in determining the rights of Black men and White women. The Black women became the scapegoat at the altar of emancipation. Sojourner Truth’s famous speech “Ain’t I woman” testifies to the double jeopardy of Black women who had to place the survival of her race before that of her race.

Black women’s persistence is fostered by the strong belief that to be Black and female is valuable and worthy of respect. In a song “A Change is Gonna Come,” Aretha Franklin (1967) expresses this feeling of enduring in spite of the odds. She sings of how it has been an “uphill journey of all the way” to find the strength to carry on. But in spite of the difficulties, Aretha “knows” that “a change in gonna come.”

Actions to bring about change, whether the struggle for an Afrocentric feminist consciousness or the persistence needed for institutional transformation, empower African-American women. Because our actions change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. By persisting in the journey towards self-definition we are changed, and this change empowers us. Perhaps this is why so many African-American women have managed to persist and “make a way out of no way.” Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition.

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