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BLACK FEMINIST POETICS



Dr. Sandu Paigavan,

M.A., SET, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English,

Dnyanopasak College, JINTUR

Dist. Parbhani - 431 509 (Maharashtra)

E-mail: sspaigavangmail.com

ABSTRACT

"One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one."

-Simon De Beauvoir

Feminism, a literary episode critiques the age old patriarchal harmony. Feminism thrusts light on the discrimination based on gender, Negro or African the degrees American Literature raised its voice against the brutal racial injustice meted out to them by the Whites in there for many centuries, and thus was born the Aesthetics of Protest. Richard

Wright's novel Native Son. Ralph Ellison's novel Invisible Man, and James Baldwin's novel the Black Psyche. But African American Women's Writing differs from African American Men's in the sense that a black woman is caught in the "triple jeopardy of race, gender, and class". And hence was born the Black Feminist Aesthetics/Poetics.

Toni Morrison, who has been writing novels like *Beloved* is the only African American writer who was honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature. Walker coined the term Womanism which is beyond feminism. Alice Walker's *Voices from Marginality* observes various arenas or walks of social structure of life in the society i.e., racial, religious, ethnic, ideological or philosophical, gender based, power based. The people who are majority in the society dominate those who are in minority or marginality. The majority not only dominates, and rules them with an upper hand but also exploits, manipulates and uses the marginal people for their various own benefits. In this way an socio-political and economic dominance is imposed on the marginal people. To cite example in U.S.A. there are various people who are marginal on the basis of race. As America is a hot pot where people of various races live together not in pure harmony or a hatred free society. In U.S.A. the whites dominate the various minority groups. African American men/women writers created their own Black Feminist Poetics/Aesthetics instead of waiting for others to do it for them. In her landmark work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* Walker (1988: IX) raises the agonizing questions to make a quest for her artistic and literary for mothers in the darkness of slavery. How could it be expected of the Black slave women to create literary works when not only literary but humanity was impossible and denied to them. They didn't have access to pen and paper, brush and colour. But they kept the spirit and ethos of their Afrocentric arts and culture alive through singing, dancing, storytelling, and quilt making etc. by inverting, the very idea of art Walker turned it on its head and reclaimed her for mothers. She argued that art and literature are not only limited to the libraries or to those having one's own room as pointed out by Virginia Woolf in her work *One's Own Room*. Creating is also necessary to those who work in kitchens and factories. The aesthetic taper of not only Black women's various arts was kept burning alive and of literature was fit even after many centuries by them after the inception of inhuman Negro slavery. When the Negroes were brought enslaved first in America in 1619 at Jamestown, Virginia, it took the "Ebony Daughters" of Africa 150 years to express themselves through literature. The causes were brutal as the black women were triply oppressed in the jeopardy of race, gender and class. Gloria Wade-Gayles (1984:10) highlight how the American society relegated them to a narrow circle in which the black women are subjected to suffering and exploitation. Treated as beasts and breeders, sold on the auction blocks, the black slave women were dehumanized. In the quest for the literary foremothers the facts were unearthed that in the beginning the literary works of many black women writers had to suffer marginality, obscurity and negligence at the hands of not only white writers and critics but black men writers and critics also.

So it fell upon the "Sturdy lack Bridges". The Black feminist writers theorists and critics themselves to evolve a Black Feminist Poetics or Aesthetics based on the evaluation, assessment and criticism, appreciation of the literary works of Black women writers. Their steady and exists in the works Black of women writers. A common underlying principle or a thread that connects the work of all Black women writers exists. This underlying similarity is thematic, stylistic. in the case of the images, symbols metaphors, techniques used in these literary works. This is the core of Black Feminist Poetics or Aesthetics. Black Feminist theorists and critics like Barbara Christum, Barbara Smith, Claudia Tate, Deborah McDowell, Mary Helen Washington, Hazel Carby and others payed the arch of Black Feminism. Barbara Smith comments: There is a veritable historical tradition of African American women writers that parallels in time the Black men and white women writing in this country. (Elaine Showalter 198: 170) Similarly Mary Helen Washigtaon (1994:446) in her work *The Darkened Eye* Restored hypothesis that a veritable tradition of African American women's literature exists Black women as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her cultural apprenticeship has not existed before for any one. At the source of her own symbol-making task, this community of writers therefore, has a tradition of work is quite recent, its continuities-Broken and sporadic. (Angelyn Mitchell 1994:446)

Similarly Stephen Henderson in his introduction to Mari Evan's Black Women Writers comments: Our history in this country took in a special turn, and our literature made a quantum leap towards maturity and honesty (with Black women's writing) (Ibid: 1984:XV) These theorists and critics staunchly argued that works of Black Feminist writers differ from the white women writes in the sense of 'race' and their works differ also from Black men writes in regard of "gender". Francis Beale (1970:99- 100) pointed out "double jeopardy" of 'race' and "gender" oppressing the Black women. Barbara Smith expanded and added the third jeopardy of 'class' to it. This triple jeopardy is unique that makes Black women's lives and literature quite different. Barbara Smith comments on this triple jeopardy plaguing the Black women and revealed in their literature. A Black feminist approach to literature that Embodies the realization that the politics of sex, as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking in the work of Black women writers is and absolute necessity. (Elaine Showalter 1985:170). The first known creative effort by a Black women is Lucy Teny's poem "Bars Flight in 1746, a poem about an Indian raid in the white settlement Deerfield, Massachusetts and continued with Phillis Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral in 1773 Black women contribution in all the genres from time to time till today and so created special field of study called "African American Women's Literature. The earliest known novel by a slave woman is Harriet Crafts. The Bondwomen's Narrative (1850) followed by Harriet Wilson's Our Nig: Sketolies from the Life of a Free Black (1859) and Francis Harper's Iota Leroy or Shadows Uplifted (1882). In genre of African American poetry it was Gwendolyn Brooks who was awarded Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her note worthy contribution to it with her A Street in Bronzeville (1945) and other collections of poetry. Nikki Giovanni, Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez, Rita Dove and Ntozake Shange with her well known choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf (1975) and others with their leuvre enriched the Black poetry and added tropes to it. Maya Angelou's autobiography I know Why the caged Bird Sings (1971) is a landmark in literature and Ntozaks Shange played a key role with her above mentioned chore poem and other plays as well as fiction.

The Civil Right Movement of the 1960s along with a 'second renaissance' there after 1970s and 1980s in African American women's literature was marked particularly with the flourishing of African American Women's writing. The major writers of this period are Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toi Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove, Toni Morrison the only African American woman Nobel Laureate novelist, Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, Terry MacMillan, and others like Zora Neale houston, Jessie Fausset, Nella Larsen in Harlem Renaissance during 1920s and 1930s. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988) is a milestone in fiction. This is the caravan of African American women's literature that contributed to all the genres of it including autobiography, poetry, prose, fiction and drama

Black critic, Stephen Henderson in his introduction to Mari Evan's Black Women Writers underlined the contribution of Black women writers with their specialty that constitutes the Black Feminist Poetics: Black women have thus brought into literature special knowledge of their lives, and experiences, as different from the descriptions/portrayals of women by men as the visions of Black writers in the sixties and fifties differ from that of whites writing on Black subject. (Ibid: 1980:XVI). Being both black and female these Black feminist writers write from a unique vantage point. They project their vision of the world, society, community, and family. With one penetrating eye they cut through the layers of institutionalized racism and sexism that uncover a core of social and intimate dilemmas. Claudia Tate (1983:XIX) comments that one of the themes of the Black feminist writing is the "quest" theme for a meaningful identity. She elucidates: A case in point is the 'quest theme' a character's personal search for meaningful identity and for self sustaining dignity and a word of

growing solution, meaningfulness and moral decay. In character selection, setting and plot the Black feminist writing is different in subtle ways than their male counterparts. Claudia Tate further comments: The Black heroine in the Black feminist writing has distinct characteristics. Some of which originates in gender and its associated sex roles. For example, the black heroine seldom elects to play the role of the alienated outsider or the lone adventurer in her quest for self affirmation (ibid: XX) Claudia Tate further explains: The hero's destination is often an actual place... but the black heroine's quest does not remain at a new destination in that she remains stationary. Her journey is an internal one and seldom takes on land (Ibid:XXI) Claudia Tate further observes that the black heroine, like her counterpart in real life suffers from triple jeopardy; the Black heroine like her counterparts in a real life not only carries the triple jeopardy burden of race, gender and class but walk, run and even fight, she is guerilla warrior "the central oppression of all people of colours well as oppression of women by men". She wages this struggle with self confidence with courage and conviction and her strategy is... black womanhood. (Ibid: XXIII). After underlining the interlocking and synergetic triple jeopardy of race, gender and class in the African American writing Barbara Smith further unravels the unifying common, thread that is also a major aspect of Black Feminist Poetics: The way for example that Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker incorporate the traditional Black female activities of root working, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery in their stories is not mere coincidence, nor is their specifically Black female language to express their own, and other characters thoughts accidental. The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of 'form' and 'content' and also takes their writing beyond the confines of white male literary structure The Black feminist critics could find innumerable commonalties in works by Black women (Elaine Showalter 1985:17)

The quest of journey motif found in the works of Black men writers has political and social repercussions or implications but Black heroine's journey. Political or social at times, is personal and psychological. In introduction to *Midnight Birds*, Mary Helen Washington writes: Black women are searching for as specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, and even though they can claim a rightful place in the Afro-American tradition and feminist tradition of women writes, it is also clear that for purposes of liberation, Black women writes will first insist on their own space. (Mitchel 1994: XVII) Joanne A. Gobbin comments on the folk tradition in *Black Feminist Poetics*: By exploring the roots of their folk and cultural tradition the Black women writers have discovered the aesthetic foundation upon which to build art that which is vital, original and rich in emotional and spiritual depth. The classic example is Hurston (Joanne M. Braxton 1990: 246)

In spite of these glorious achievements of Black Feminist Poetics it consists of some of the inherent lacunae. Debourah McDowell warns not to be obsessed with the searching of common themes and motifs. Characters by the present, generation sees no need to perpetuate those stereotypes of strong and sturdy black bridges, and today the black women writers are exploring all aspects of black women's experience-their weakness and failings the characters they portray are neither flawless heroines nor helpless victims. The black women writers today are prophets for a new day."

Elaine Showalter (1989:225) points that the Female Aesthetics also has serious weaknesses. As many feminists sharply noted, its emphasis on the importance of female biological experience came dangerously close to sexist essentialism. Its efforts to establish a specificity of female writing through the hypothesis of women's language, a ost motherland, or a cultural enclave cannot be supported by scholarship. In so far as the Feminist criticism ran the risk of ghettoization.

But still Black Feminist Poetics is marching towards new directions and dimensions. Alice Walker has substituted feminism with womanism, in her classic work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Alice Walker (1983: XI) defines the term which instills new hope in the feminist epistemology. According to Walker a womanist is:

A black feminist, or feminist of color. Friendship between women. Also a woman who loves other women, sexually and or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Black Feminist Poetics Aesthetics and African American women's literature in such a way are taking a quantum leap and making rapid strides.

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