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Black Feminist Poetics : A Critique



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ABSTRACT

*Someday somebody' It Stand up and talk about me Black and Beautiful- And sing about me,
And put on plays about me! I reckon on 'll be Me myself!*

Yes, it 'll be me

-Langston Hughes. epigraph

This poem, best summarizes how black / feminist writers created own Black Feminist Poetics/ Aesthetics instead of waiting for there others to do it for them.

Research Paper

In her landmark essay/book In Search of Our Mother Gardens Alice Walker (1988: XI) raises the agonising questions to make a quest for her artistic and literary foremothers in the darkness of slavery, How could it be expected of the Black slave woman to create literary works when not only literacy but humanity was impossible and denied to them. They didn't have access to pen, and pape, brush and colour. But still they kept the spirit and ethos of their

Afro-centric arts and culture alive through singing, dancing, storytelling, and quilt making etc. By reverting the very idea of art Walker turn it on its head and reclaimed her foremothers. She argued that art and literature is not only firaited to the libraries or to umose 'having one's own room. Creating is necessary to those works in kitchen's and factories.

The aesthetic taper of not only Black women's various arts and was kept burning alive and of literature was lit 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) highlights how the American society relegated them to a narrow circle in which the black women are subjected to suffering and exploitation. Wade-Gayles argues that American society consists of three circles. In the outer and larger circle live the whites. The second circle consists of black males and in another narrower dark circle the black women are thrust. Treated as beasts and breeders, sold on the auction blocks, the black slave women were dehumanized.

In the quest search of 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 writer critics but black men writers and critics also. Black women writers were not anthologized and were not appreciated. Deborah McDowell pointed out the literary history's 'sin of omission" in Patricia Mayor Speck's. *The Female Imagination*, Robert Stepto's *From Behind The Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, And Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* and even by David Littlejohn.

So it fell upon the *Sturdy Black 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 study and exploration revealed that 'a veritable tradition' eats in the works Black women writers. A common underlying principle or a thread mat connects the works of all Plack women writers. 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 Christian, Barbara Smith, Claudia Tate, Deborah McDowell, Mary Helen Washington, Hazel Carby and others paved 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 1985: 170)

Similarly Mary Helen Washington (1994: 446) in her work *The Darkened Eye Restored* comments and emphasizes Barbara Smith's hypothesis that a veritable tradition of African American women's literature exists: Black woman 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 that is quite recent, its continuities- broken and sporadic. (Angelyn Mitchel 1994:446) Stephen Henderson, wrote in his introduction to Mari Livan'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 writers in the sense of race and their works differ also from Black men writers 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 an absolute necessity. (Elaine Showalter 1985: 170) The first known creative effort by a black woman is Lucy Terry's poem *Bars Flight* in 1746, a poem about an Indian raid in the white settlement Deerfield, Massachusetts and continued with Phillis Wheatly's *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* in 1773. The literary voices of the 18th century women were made bold in the 19th century when they spoke on local and national issues. From Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist who could neither read nor write but whose works were rendered by others. Maria Stewart is the first woman who made public speaking a profession. Anna Julia Copper and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper whose antiracist and feminist writings are even useful today. The earliest known novel by a slave woman is Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). It was followed by Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1882). Black women writers made distinguished and versatile contribution in all the genres form time to time till today and so created special field of study called African American women's literature. The Harlem Renaissance novelist like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen and during the Depression Zora Neale fursten contributed with her classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, so did Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brook a poet and novelist wrote the novel *Maud Martha*. Louise Merrywether's novel *Daddy is a Number Runner* is also remarkable. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s along with a second renaissance thereafter in 1970s and 1980s in women's literature was marked particularly with African American women's writing. The major writers of this period are Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove, Toni Morrison, the only African American woman Noble Laureate novelist, Ntozake Shange. Audre Lorde, Terry MacMillan, Maya Angelou and

others. 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 *Writer's Black Women Novelists* (1984), acknowledges the heroic role Black women have played in the struggle for freedom and equality both here and in the United States and abroad by Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hammer. He underlined the contribution of Black women writer 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 the from that of whites writing on black subjects... They (Black women) braved the ideological strictares of the sixes and freed them selves the from the roles assigned to them in the writing of their male counterparts, where depicted as queens and princesses or as earth mothers, and idealized Big Mommas of superhuman wisdom and strength they were unrecognizable as individuals. (ibid. 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, family. With one penetrating eye they cut through the layers institutionalized racism and sexism that uncover a core of social and intimate dilemmas. Claudia Tate (1983: XIX) comments that one of the things of the Black feminist writing is the 'quest theme for a meaningful identity. She elucidates: is the A case in point quest theme'- a character's personal search for a meaningful identity and for self sustaining dignity and a world of growing isolation, 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) This does not mean that she is not concerned with self esteem and attaining meaningful social position, but her quest is on different plane She does not for instance journey across the Northeast like Richard Wright's *Cross Damon* in *The Outsider* nor does explore the underground regions of urban civilization like Ralph Ellison's *invisible man*. On the contrary she is literally tied down to her children and thus to a particular place, or she is ensconced in her community dependent on friends and relatives for strength during time of hardship and during times of relaxation. Claudia Tate further explains that because of the restrictions placed on the black heroine's physical movement, she must conduct her quest within close boundaries, often within room or borders of the towns. In their quest of both the black hero and heroine both seek higher levels of emotional and intellectual awareness of the self and the world.

Claudia Tate comments:

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 an internal one and seldom takes on land (ibid. XXI) The black heroine's quest within given area, her strong inclination forming complex, personal relationships add depth to her identity quest in lieu of geographical breadth. Self esteem is so primary an issue in writings by black women many heroines suffer from a loss of pride and personal worth 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 also stand erect under their weight, must also walk, run and even fight. She is guerilla warrior "fighting" as De Veaux insists, "the central oppression of all people of colour as 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 the 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 commonalities in works by Black women (Elaine Showalter 1985:170) Barbara Smith points out the thematically, stylistically, aesthetically and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific, political, economical and social experience- they have been obliged to share. She offers, as an example the incorporation of root working, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery in the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Smith maintains further that Hurston, Margaret Walker, Morrison, Alice Walker use a "specifically black female language to express their own and their characters' thoughts. Liliane Robinson comments that the way the texture of sentences, choice of metaphors, pattern of exposition and narrative relate the black (feminist) ideology. Textual analysis reveals thematic commonalities and linguistics, commonalities. The use of clothing as an iconography is central to the writing by Black women. The imagery of clothing as abundant in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Janie's apron, her silk and satin, her head scarves all symbolizes various stages of her journey from captivity to liberation Alice Walker's Meridian's red cap and dungarees reject as her conventional images and expectation.

In Alice Walker and Toni Morrison the theme of thwarted female artist figures prominently. Pauline Breedlove in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is obsessed with ordering things. Similarly, Eva Pean in *Sula* is forever ordering the pleats of her dress. Likewise,

Meridian's mother in Alice Walker's novel Meridian makes artificial flowers and small prayer pillows. A final theme that recurs in the novels of the Black women writers is motif of journey or quest theme as explained by Claudia Tate earlier calls it. The quest of journey motif also 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 writers. it is also clear that for purposes of liberation, Black women writers will first insist on their own space (Mitchel. 1994:XVII) Black Worden writers use specific language, devices, different than black men writers and more over the black women writers create their own mythic structures. Some black women writers created narrative strategies whose major concern is the empowerment of women. The quest of Hurston's heroine Janie is to recover her own voice and own a sense of autonomy. 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. Deborah McDowell warns not to be obsessed with the searching of common themes and motifs. Before the 1960s the *Black Feminist Poetics* produced the counter stereotypes of strong black womanhood vs helpless weak black women characters but 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 weaknesses and failings the characters they portray are neither flawless heroines nor helpless victims. The black women writers today h are prophets for a new day." Elaine Showalter (1989: 225) points that the *Female Aesthetics* also has serious weaknesses. As many feminist sharply noted, its emphasis on the importance of female biological experience came dangerous close to sexist essentialism. Its efforts to establish a specificity of female writing through the hypothesis of women's language, a lost motherland, or a cultural enclave cannot be supported by scholarship. 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' Garden & Womanat of She* (1983: XI) defines the term which instills new hope in the feminist episteme. According to Walker a womanist is:

- 1) A black feminist, or feminist of colour.
- 2) Friendship between women. Also a women who loves other women, sexually and or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength.
- 3) *Black Feminist Poetics/Aesthetics* and African American women's literature are taking a quantum leap and making rapid strides.

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