“And Ain’t I a Woman?” Intersections of Race, Gender and Class in Black Feminist Theory and Black Women’s Literature ( Literary Practice)

Abstract

Sojourner Truth’s powerful statement at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 was a deconstruction of the notion of a global, common womanhood. Eminent black feminist critic bell hooks had spoken in the context of the racial realities that had made African-American women’s experience in America a unique one because of the unusual position they occupied in society. Black women were expected to choose between “being black” and “being female”. Literature is a powerful ideological tool that influences as well as responds to socio-cultural and political discourses. Literary representations therefore can debunk stereotypical notions about marginalized groups in grappling with problematic issues of ethnicity and identity and intersections of race, gender and class. Black Feminist theory was instrumental in defying homogenization of the “woman’s dilemma” and monolithic concepts of sisterhood. The rich and diverse experience of black women in America has been given space within the tradition of black women’s writing. Contemporary feminist debates and changing perspectives have emerged as challenges to the literary practice adopted by Black women writers. This paper proposes to examine the relevance of a distinct and unique Black Feminist consciousness as triggering the emergence of a black women's literary movement. The paper would interrogate the implications of deconstructionist debates in the context of black women’s struggles (in life and literature). The paper shall incorporate historicity as a methodology to examine the intersections of race, gender and class in theory and practice. It would establish that reverberations of Sojourner Truth’s question “And Ain’t I a Woman?” forged the sisterhood between lived experience and literary representations to reinforce the black feminist theoretical standpoint.
1. INTRODUCTION

Black feminist literary studies/theory and Black women’s literary practices had always an uneasy and fraught relationship to mainstream feminism and white European literary theory and practices. The problem lay to an extent in the exclusionist elitism of mainstream feminism and the politics and practice of reading and writing literature in the American academia. While the one attempted to homogenize the problems of all women under the rubric of a monolithic “sisterhood”, the other evolved a hegemonic discourse that excluded/marginalized issues of race. Toni Morrison’s now canonical Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination deconstructs classical white American literary texts to point out how the Africanist presence has been misrepresented or ignored in much of mainstream literature in America. The need to “talk back” and the agenda of destabilizing racial, gender and class hierarchies have been the tour de force of much of Black feminism/feminist theory and literary practice. The early American woman’s rights movement embraced the notion of a universal “woman” who was “generally white, middle to upper class, and based in the Eastern portions of the United States. It most certainly did not include the female slaves…” (Anne Ducille, Feminist Literary Theory, 2006.p.29)

Sara Evans traces the inception/emergence of feminism in the United States to the abolition movement of the 1830s and 1840s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s— both struggles for racial equality—during which they moved from “individual discontents to social movement in their own behalf”. The ideology that condemned oppression was “analogous to their own” and they learned to initiate and organize collective action that helped them to claim equality for themselves. (Sara Evans, Personal Politics, 1980. pp.24-5). However, one of the primary paradoxes of first-wave feminism in the United States was that the inhuman condition of the black slaves served inspirational and instructive functions for white women. Also, ironically, black women who were often marginalized and at times completely excluded from it “had a keener sense of gender, as well as racial inequality; a more nuanced, sun-up to sun-down, field hand and household experience of the sexual division of labor; a longer and more complex history of what could be called feminist activism”.(Ducille, 2006. pp.30-31).

The failure of mainstream feminism to acknowledge the history of black feminist agitation and writing has resulted in the rift between the former and Black feminist theory/criticism and determined the subversive nature of Black feminist writing (literary practice).

2. RISE OF BLACK FEMINISM

Black women of America did not have the tradition of submission to male authority or dependence on men as the white women. This was usually traced to their African heritage of matriliny. The slave cabins were not patriarchal realms, families were mostly kinship not nuclear and households were more often than not, female headed. This was due to the fact that black women’s roles were defined by responsibility and intensive
labor rather than power. They shared a tradition of self-reliance, sisterhoods, women’s networks and female entrepreneurship that survived despite slavery in the New World. In the nineteenth century, while white women were engaged in a fight for suffrage and equal rights to property and ownership, their fundamental objective was to overthrow male domination. Meanwhile black women were concerned with the basic human right to “own” their own bodies, sexualities and labor—not to be owned as chattels. White women saw marriage as a “civil death” and fought to change divorce laws, while black women lobbied to change laws that prohibited marriage. While white women rejected traditional gender roles, black women wanted the right to reclaim traditional gender roles, the luxury to love their own men and mother their own children. (Ducille, 2006, 29-52)

Historically, black women and women of color have been asked to choose, differentiate and prioritize their racial and gender identities, to “get out of their skin” and divide their “self”. White women however were not expected to distinguish between being a woman and being white. This problematic of essentialism has haunted western feminism and the fall-out has been a rift of ideology, political standpoint and literary practice. Under slavery, black women were exploited in gender specific ways as the institution of slavery thrived on the commodification of black women’s labor, sexuality and reproductive abilities. Rape, concubinage and forced impregnation sustained the exploitative system. Black women therefore were subjugated in terms of gender and race and black women writers, activists and intellectuals had shared concerns on issues of race and gender. Anne Ducille writes that this “double consciousness” and the notion of “woman” as a “complex and inclusive category” was common to both elite black thinkers and writers as well as the masses of impoverished and underprivileged black women (Ducille, 2006,pp.36). In other words, black feminist theory was enriched by the intersections of race, class and gender, which lent itself to a symbiotic relationship with black women’s creative writing to forge a sustained “sisterhood”. Sojourner Truth’s impromptu address with its famous refrain “And ain’t I a Woman?” at the Akron Women’s Rights Convention in 1851 may have been appropriated as a feminist battle cry by white women, but the true import of Truth’s “scathing indictment of the racist ideology that positioned black females outside the category of woman and human while at the same time exploiting their “femaleness.” Her words “also commented, ironically and pointedly, on the failed sisterhood that sought to silence her within and exclude her from the very movement that women like her inspired, enabled and initiated.” (Ducille, 2006.p.37) Truth’s words and sentiments were a part of the discourse shared among black women as they remained determined to assert their own womanhood, subjectivity, identity and humanity. Black women like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson “insisted upon telling their own stories. In so doing, they not only expanded the concept of womanhood; they also took back the particularity of slavery, embodying with their own lived experience what white feminists had reduced to a metaphor.” (Ducille, 2006.p.38)
3. BLACK WOMEN’S LITERARY MOVEMENT: CONSTRUCTING A COUNTER CANON

Black women activists, artists, writers and intellectuals of the twentieth century found themselves doubly marginalized. Within the male centered African-American writing tradition, they were pushed to the periphery on allegations of feminist preoccupation while they were excluded from mainstream feminist literary canons for their alleged preoccupation with race. So in art as in life, black women writers had then the only option of carving their own path in theory and practice. In Reading Black Reading Feminist, Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes Anna Julia Cooper who had argued "convincingly and eloquently" for the recognition of the black women's literary tradition:

"One muffled strain in the silent South, a jarring chord and a vague uncomprehend cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black woman... The "other side" has not been represented by one who "lives there" And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America... [just] as our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot quite put themselves in the dark man's place, neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact voice of the Black Woman."


Gates writes that the challenge thrown by Julia Cooper to the authority of the black male voice that presumed and claimed to speak of the "Negro experience" in its totality while ignoring the complex and problem- ridden questions of an exclusive black women's experience has, after 75 years, expressed manifested itself in the emergence of an African American women's literary tradition of their own. Unlike most of the black male authors of the older generation who disowned any African-American influence on their writing, claiming to speak of a monolithic human experience or own only a "white paternity", black women writers drew their strength from other black women literary ancestors like Zora Neale Hurston and Anne Petry.

The writers of the African-American women's literary movement write from within a tradition, inspired by a strong sense of bonding with other black women writers-- sharing a literary "sisterhood" as created and encouraged by writers/publishers like Toni Morrison and owning a maternal ancestry. These women are drawn together by the strong bonds of a shared and collective experience and with the intention of breaking the "conspiracy of silence "that had oppressed the selfhood of black women. In their literary representation of the African-American women characters, these writers have rejected the stereotypical images of black women not only by the white American writers but also the black male writers who have projected black women sentimentally as a reaction to the negative white racist stereotypes as the Black Goddess, Black Queen, Super Woman, Mother Goddess etc. In defying the misrepresentations in the body of American literature of African-American women, they have exploded the myths, false notions and expected paradigms about black women's situation/experience/identity in America.
As Gates says, reading the text of the African American women writers allows one to "overhear a black woman testifying about (what)the twin scourges of sexism and racism, merged into one oppressive entity, actually do to a human being, how the combination confines the imagination, perplexes the will and delimits free choice. What unites these texts, what makes them cohere into that imaginary meta text we call a tradition, is their shared structures and common themes."


He quotes Mary Helen Washington who places the black women writers within the tradition they created for themselves:

"Their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written...Women talk to other women in this tradition."


History—traditionally the domain of men had erased women-- especially black women from its pages but undaunted, the black woman emerged, determined to speak "her story." Black women writers therefore as most black women in real life, pitted against insurmountable odds, fall back on the nurturing support of a sisterhood and shared understanding and empathy. The black women characters they represent in their novels also rely on such a nurturing system though each woman, in her own way is in search of an identity and selfhood – a quest amid their daily toil. The collective experience and the group efforts of black women writers to express their perceptions about their own situations in a racist, classist, sexist patriarchal white American society that has operated in terms of the worst possible exploitation for them have been instrumental in the shaping of a black feminist literary theory and criticism that has emerged as a new genre in the history of "traditional" literary criticisms.

Feminist critics and like Anne Julia Cooper, Mary Helen Washington, Mari Evans, Gloria Wayde Gayles, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria T. Hull, Valerie Smith, Jacqueline de Weever, Hortense Spillers, Gayl Jones, Claudia Tate, Melissa Walker, Michael Awkward, Houston A. Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Elliot Butler Evans and many others have placed writings by black women writers in the perspective of "black feminism" that in its essence, is a search for "identification" and "expression" of a long neglected segment of American society constituted by a thrice marginalized group, namely African American women.

Veering away from Euro- American critical practices like structuralism that has believed in the separation of the literary text from its author (to achieve objective distancing), black feminist criticism and black women’s literary practice as a body have resisted this separation. Linden Peach writes that black literary criticism has been wary about accepting Euro-American critical trends, "...partly because reclaiming an identity and (narrative) voice to counter centuries of denial and misrepresentation is central to much post-colonial writings, However a major reason for this reluctance to divorce text completely from its social and political context is that literature would lose its social functions. For African and African-
American writers the novel has been an important vehicle to represent the social context, to expose inequality, racism and social injustice.” (Linden Peach, Toni Morrison, 1995,p.5)

The debate of artistic/aesthetic objectivity versus subjective authenticity may continue in the critical context, but for the black feminist writer and critic, the richness, diversity and complexity of their experience as black women in America is the inexhaustible well from which they draw their inspiration and in the expression of which their imagination plays freely in uninhibited joy. So for Alice Walker, black women are the most fascinating and beautiful creatures in the world, which have retained their beauty despite all that they have gone through. This mystery of an inner reservoir of spiritual beauty that they seem to possess has lured Walker and other black women writers again and again into their lives and compelled them to portray their lives and labors in their fiction. Black feminism therefore has emerged as a parallel movement as distinct from white feminism. Critics like bell hooks and Barbara Christian assert that black feminism, though not separatist in intentions, has wished to underscore the difference between the situations of black and white women in America and the world. No monolithic concept could therefore accommodate the heterogeneity and variety of the black woman’s situation. According to Barbara Smith, "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, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share.” (Barbara Smith, Conditions:Two, 1977.p.32)

Alice Walker, a self-proclaimed feminist vouchsafed this stand point when she coined the new word/term 'womanist' to describe black feminism. She defined "womanist" as the "feminist of color --- a woman who loves other women sexually or non-sexually... and ... is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male and female (Alice Walker, quoted in Sunday Times, 17th June, 2001). Poetically, Walker relates womanism to feminism as purple to lavender thus conveying the spirituality (purple being a color that stands for spirituality), vibrancy and strength of the black women’s unique experience. Being abased and abused physically, emotionally and psychically every day, they have yet been able to rise from the morass of daily duress like Phoenixes.

Lorraine Bethel in Some of Us Are Brave writes that at the core of Black feminism lies “Black women-identification” and that

"Black feminist literary criticism ... is most simply the idea of Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels --- psychic, intellectual as well as physical--with other Black women... Black women-identification is black women not accepting male --- including Black male --- definitions of femaleness or Black womanhood..."

(Lorraine Bethel, Some of Us Are Brave 1982, p.184)

Toni Morrison as an editor in Random House has played a key role in providing a "generous stewardship" to a number of black women writers including Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones and Angela Davis. She has inspired by her own example a younger generation of writers, especially Gloria Naylor and created a
"literary sisterhood" that promised every new talent a chance to tell her own story in her own words (voice) and encouraged good writing by publishing them (Gates, 1990, p.4)

The consistent and ceaseless struggles of the African-American woman to survive in a country where she has been the victim of three fold discrimination (viz. race, class and gender) and yet managed to keep her "self" afloat can be termed as nothing short of heroic. Countless such women have suffered and died in this battle for survival, which the mundane business of living had come to stand for them. Their problem-ridden existence was not only a physical burden but a psychological and moral one too accounting for the raw pain that one encounters in the first hand accounts of the lives of these women. Needless to say that literary renderings inspired by so much trauma and torture, of such determined effort and hard-won triumph would be moving in its intensity. The traumatic lived experience of some famous black women that have been narrated in literature bear evidence of a past full of turmoil and toil. Literary images of black women by African-American black women writers repeatedly represent them in the light of their ceaseless work and images of African-American women in their work roles are the most predominant images in their fiction. The reason for this lies not only in the personal experience of almost every African-American woman writer who has taken up the pen but also the result of a collective common experience and a persuasive concern they have shared with the women of their race. Try as they might, African-American women cannot relate their peculiar predicament as women of labor to the experience of the white woman or the African-American man. Sharing the same gender with the former, their cultural realities were and to an extent still are, different from theirs and sharing the same race with the latter has placed them more at a disadvantage because of the simple fact that they have no one else to shift their burden of pain, responsibility or work as do their men folk on them in sheer frustration and masculine aggression, irresponsibility or liberty. And work they must if they must keep their children from starvation and death and the family afloat.

As Angela Davis asserts, slavery constructed an alternative definition of womanhood for the black women that included a tradition of "hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and an insistence on sexual equality" (Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class, 1981. p.29) Black womanhood therefore, in essence became an antithesis of white womanhood therefore, in that they achieved it through a combination of “grit, shit and mother wit” (Angela Davis, The Black Scholar:3, 1971.p.7), all of which entailed a tremendous capacity to endure pressure, hardships and toil.

Sojourner Truth (born Isabella) was an emancipated slave who had adopted the name after forty years of struggle to become free and then to carry on the mission that she felt God intended for her). She was a crusader against oppression and by the onset of the civil war had come to represent a brand of female, communitarian, vernacular African-American leadership that rivaled the masculine, individualist, literary model of the black male
spokesman. Truth’s most famous oration titled “And aren’t I a woman” had these words as a rhetorical question in her speech—words that were the crux of her challenge as a black woman to racial and sexual stereotypes that few had had the foresight to address so courageously. When white ministers spoke about women as dependents who needed to be carried over ditches and helped into carriages. Sojourner Truth’s powerful voice reverberated with the thunder of hitherto unasked questions:

"Nobody ever helped me into carriages or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place,... I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me --- and ar’nt I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well --and ar’nt I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen 'amongst all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief none but Jesus heard --- and ar’nt I a woman?"

(The Norton Anthology, p.196-97)

In this speech of unparalleled eloquence and candor Sojourner Truth raised issues that had hitherto been taken for granted. The sexual and racial stereotypes that had relegated the black woman to an existence where her labor was exploited and she herself considered a beast of burden were challenged by her. The central rhetorical question underlined strongly the difference in the life experiences of black women and white women. The latter who always "had the best place" and were "carried over ditches" and were secure in the comforts of their luxurious homes could never identify with the shocking realities of a black woman's life and labor. Turning the denigrating stereotype of towering height and Amazonian strength of the black woman to an advantage that she should be proud of as an additional boon and a weapon she could utilize to counter male oppression, Sojourner Truth showed the budding feminists a new way to shape their one dimensional struggles for freedom from patriarchy and male domination. In this context bell hooks writes:

"Racist stereotypes of all the strong, superhuman black women are operative myths in the minds of many white women allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization”

(Feminist Theory, 1994.p.13)

She posits that just as Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique ignores the existence of working-class women who were already in the labor force and could only long for leisure time and money that would allow them to stay at home and be housewives and for whom freedom meant liberty from the back-breaking routine of daily labor, so did most socialist feminists, while focusing on class and gender issues dismiss, exclude, or ignore the race problem, which was a stark reality for women belonging to the minority race. As Friedan “did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure class housewife” (bell hooks, 1994. p.2) so did “privileged feminists” fail to take within the purview of theories they were shaping, the peculiar situation
of women of the minority race and their collective experience of racist discrimination in America. bell hooks brings to the fore sociological issues that have been conveniently overlooked by these feminists. Speaking from her personal experience she says that black women "who live daily in oppressive situations, often acquire an awareness of patriarchal politics from their lived existence, just as they developed strategies of resistance..." (bell hooks, 1994,p.19). The joy of being together and the bondage of sisterhood may be new to the white, middle-class burgeoning feminists but to black women like her, "sisterhood" was nothing new for "(she) had not known a life where women had not been together, where women had not helped, protected, and loved one another deeply..." (bell hooks, 1994,p.11). Finally, saying that her intention was not to undermine or "diminish “feminist struggle but to "enrich, to share in the work of making a liberators ideology and a liberators movement”, bell hooks points out the peculiar dilemma of black women, who, she contends, must "recognize the special vantage point (their) marginality gives (them) and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter hegemony”(bell hooks, 1994,p.15). The interesting parallel that bell hooks draws between the black man and the white woman exposes the inherent/inborn tendency in human beings to shift the burden of labor, responsibility and pain to a group whose social status is lower than theirs. In a perceptive study of the situation she writes:

"As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppresor in that we are allowed no institutionalized "other" that we can exploit or oppress... white women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as oppressors of black people.”

(bell hooks, 1994,p.15)

It is not surprising therefore that the lived experience of black women would shape their consciousness in a manner different from those who have a relative advantage over them or even a relative degree of privilege compared to them. Their "world view" would therefore be different because it was churned out of a first-hand encounter with discrimination, oppression and exploitation. Bernice McNair Barnett's essay titled “Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race and Class,” where she has enlisted three “major biases” that have been encouraged and perpetuated by the dominant white society;

“(1) a negative problem-oriented image that stereotypically connects Black women with various pathologies within the family such as female-headiness, illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, poverty and welfarism (Barnett, Robinson and Bailey 1984; Hill Collins 1989; Higginbotham 1982;S scott 1982);
(2) a middle-class orientation that excludes, ignores, or makes inconsequential the experiences of the poor and working-class women, a large percentage of whom are Black (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Higginbotham 1982); and
(3) an apolitical-non-leadership image of black and poor women as political pessimist’s.
(Race, Class and Gender p.268)

Like bell hooks, Gerda Lerner have also arrived at the difference in meaning that women's liberation has meant for different women. She writes:

“Women, as all oppressed groups, perceive their status relatively, in comparison with their own groups, with previously known conditions, with their own expectations. White society has long decreed that while "woman's place is in the home", Black woman's place is in the white woman's kitchen. No wonder that many Black women define their own "liberation" as being free to take care of their own homes and their own children, supported by a man with a job (emphasis in original).”
(Race, Class and Gender, p.267)

Giddings asserts that "Black women had a history of their own, one which reflect(ed) their distinct concerns, values and the role they have played both as African-Americans and women."24 Barnett quotes a black woman respondent whom she had interviewed in the course of finding out the role of black women political activists which indicated a" traditional gender stratification within Black society" that led to devaluation of women's roles:

When you are dealing with Black men and women and the fragile position of Black males, you can expect the Black women, even though they might do all the work, will not be recognized as doing the work or leading anything... Black women especially had to work hard, but never ever threaten the fragile position of their Black men. They still have to do this. (Race, Class and Gender, p.279)

Gloria Wayde Gayles writes in No Crystal Stair that the assumption that black and white women were" sisters in oppression" was a "problematic one" because the differences are obvious. One cannot overlook the traditional, historical fact that white women have participated actively and without coercion, in the oppression of black men and women. The have been "Ladies" who lived in leisure because black women have been "mammies". They have been protected and pampered, while black women have been dehumanized, brutalized and devalued as blacks and as females. (Glorida Wayde Gayles, No Crystal Stair, p.9)

4. STEREOTYPES AND COUNTER-Stereotypes

Images of African-American Women in African-American Fiction: In Black Feminist Criticism, Barbara Christian defines stereotype, whether positive or negative “as a by-product of racism…one of the vehicles through which racism tries to reduce the human being to a nonhuman level” because "stereotype is the very opposite of humaneness." (Black Feminist Criticism, 1985, p.16). African-American women could not therefore have avoided being projected as stereotypes either in society/real life) or in literature (especially fiction where
there is scope for the fullest development of characters). The "invisibility" of the African-American woman in white American literature is not difficult to understand. As Elizabeth Schultz writes,

"On national wage scales she has always been the lowest paid; in national political life she has only recently been seen; in national statistics she is categorized as the unwed mother the welfare recipient, the maid; in national myth she is designated by multiple names all of which conceal her identity --- Aunt Jemima, Mammy, Matriarch, sometimes Sister, Black Bitch, Girl."

(What Manner of Woman, p.316)

It has been traditionally accepted that unlike her white counterpart, the black woman has known within the confines of her own community a freedom from sexist categories but it was easy to overlook the fact that this "freedom" was so riddled with problems and so overridden with the burdens of feeding, clothing and holding the family together that more often than not, it was a freedom that they did not desire. As W.E.B. Dubois commented, it was a dubious freedom "thrust contemptuously upon them" for which the price they have paid is very dear. (Darkwater, Reprinted in To be a Black Woman, 1970.p.234-35) In an essay on the dominant images of Black American women in African-American literature, Barbara Christian traces the stereotypical images that had been constructed regarding the black women in both white American literature (Anglo American) as well as African American literature. The novels of slavery and Reconstruction periods including white American (esp. Southern White Literature) fashioned an image of the black woman with the ulterior motive of perpetuating the conflicts between men and black women and most importantly, to create “a dumping ground for those female functions a basically puritan society couldn’t confront.”(Christian, p.3) The politics of oppression that operated behind the projection of such images was condoned overtly as the audio visual media readily accepted and encouraged without hesitation the broadcast of these negative images.

Bell hooks writes that “Sapphire’s shrewish personality was used primarily to create sympathy in viewers for black male lot” and today it “is projected onto any black woman who overtly expresses bitterness, anger and rage against her lot.” This dominant image has caused many black women, “to repress these feelings for fear of being regarded as shrewish sapphires.” (bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman, 1985.p.86). Another dominant image of the black woman was spawned by the generations of the myth of the “bad” black woman. Gerda Lerner shows how racist prejudice operated in indicting black women:

“Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to the racist mythology; therefore to assault her and exploit her sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behaviour. A wide range of practices reinforced this myth: the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title "Miss" or "Mrs" to any black woman; the taboos against respectable social mixing of the races; the refusal to let black women customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of single toilet facilities to both sexes
of blacks; the different legal sanctions against rape, abuse of minors and other sex crimes when committed against white or black women.”

(Lerner, *Black Women in America*, p.163-64)

Historical records indicate that the sexual degradation of the black women by both black and white men could be possible because the conditions of poverty in the black community expose black women to the many dimensions of sex at an early age which has freed her from repression and enabled her to accept sexual relations without inhibition.(Schultz,p.328) This relative sexual freedom however has also been “contemptuously thrust upon her.” Only when one takes into account the conditions of poverty and work tedium of the black women can one appreciate the sexual freedom that she has been able to exercise. Ann Petry writes in *The Street*,

“... people were so damn poor they didn't have time to do anything but work, and their bodies were the only source of relief from the pressure under which they lived; and where the crowding together made the young girls wise beyond their years.” (*1964.p.206*)

The work songs on the other hand give a view apart from the master-slave relationship on which the narratives mostly focus. Here, the freedom of music that is intensely personal and not dependent on any external media to be spread, gave the scope for exploring relationships between black men and women. Here were to be found courting, love making, success and disappointment in love. Writes Christian,

“Almost always the substances of the work songs about or by women are sifted through the cry of hard times and how that affects relationships: The men who caught trains and left for whatever reasons, the lack of money, the pervasive sense of danger, the need for a woman to be independent of men, an independence imposed rather than deserved, all shape the songs....slave narratives and work song alike project black women as caught in the vise of hard times, their spirits occasionally rising to the heights of heroism but more often tempered by the nibbling need to always be practical.”

(Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*,p.7)

Most of the early fiction by black women writers concentrated on the experiences of black women in the rural South where these women served as drudges everywhere. A gradual shift in focus began with Ann Petry's *The Street* that represented for the first time, black women as labourers in the concrete tangles of the North --- the black city woman and her ghettoization and all the registration, recording of a new trend of victimization Anne Petry's *The Street* marks a change in the setting and tone in the literature of the black women. It brings the literature into the twentieth century, for the concrete plantation became the dwelling place of more and more blacks in this century. After the publication of this novel, the black city women could not be forgotten. The particular brand of slavery under which she exists meant that new changes in the literature would have to occur. Contemporary black women fiction writers/novelists have attempted to portray not only the complex struggles of black women's existence but the diversity and richness of their existence, from their own perspective. Here we encounter black women who have come forward to shed light on their situations, to discover their selfhoods and identities, to register and understand their growth, to examine “(their) relationship to men, children, society, history and philosophy as
she had experienced it.” (Christian, p.16) She is no longer ready to accept the set images that society and others have imposed upon her --- she has at last broken out of her mould to boldly envision new realities, new truths and new images for herself. There is no single monolithic image of the black women/ African-American women in the contemporary African-American black women’s fiction.

According to Schultz, the celebration of the fact of survival and the search for freedom are two dominating aspects of African-American literature115 and against this backdrop must one view the work of contemporary African-American women writers whose subjects are mainly the complex reality of their black women characters and their struggles for achieving freedom and dignity. Claudia Tate writes that a dominant theme in black women’s fiction “is the quest theme --- a character’s personal search for a meaningful identity and for self-sustaining dignity in a world of growing isolation, meaninglessness and moral decay.” She continues:

"Black women writers project their vision of the world, society, community, family, their lovers, even themselves, most often through the eyes of black female characters and poetic personae. Their angle of vision allows them to see what white people, especially males seldom see. With one penetrating glance they cut through layers of institutionalized racism and sexism to uncover a core of social contradictions and intimate dilemmas which plague all of us, regardless of race or gender. Through their art they share their vision of possible resolution with those who cannot see.”

(Claudia Tate, Black Women Writers at Work, 1983, p.xx)

The emergence of these black women writers has created a tradition in itself. Since the nineteen thirties African-American women novelists and poets have made a mark on the consciousness of not only black women but the whole world. Gwendolyn Brooks, Ann Petry, Dorothy west, Carolyn Rodgers, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Mari Evans, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, to name a few are writers of a new tradition who have created/laid paths and travelled new roads by themselves. They have broken the conspiracy of silence, given voice to the muted black women and allowed their fullest development as characters in their novels. The richness of their own experience as black women in America have shaped their literary imagination and interwoven the fabric of their novels. New sociological and literary approaches to history (Hazel Carby’s Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist, for example) become useful methods for reclaiming the past and forging culturally sensitive paradigms for the future.

5. DEBATES AND CHALLENGES

The poststructuralist deconstructionist debates of the 1970s dislocated the feminine subject as Autobiography became the site for major theoretical debates. The notion of a female selfhood and centrality of locus that could be liberated from a state of neglect or repression and be made visible through writing came to be questioned. This “crisis of the subject” despite the possibility of new representational spaces put the female subject in a
position of alterity and non-presence. The outcome was seen by feminist critiques as doubly negative for women, who at the precise juncture when they could have claimed subject position; saw the dissolution of the subject, which pushed them back to the marginal position. In this context, autobiographies and testimonials were important documents for black women writers and black feminist critics who attempted to reconstruct palimpsests in history, recover “lost” texts by their literary foremothers and acknowledge a maternal ancestry. While the dislocation of the female subject that hinted at the impossibility of autobiography as a creative genre seems to have gone against the grain of black women’s literary practice, Toni Morrison deployed the technique of “rememorize” in her novel *Beloved* (based on the true story of a fugitive slave Margaret Garner) where the repressed memories are recalled in a therapeutic and cathartic exercise, to open up new representational spaces.

The fallacy of essentialism that has plagued American white feminism as well as French *escritoire feminine* ironically emerged as a problematic when black feminist writers like Hazel Carby and Audre Lord spoke about the absence of the lesbian presence and the sexual essentialism that rendered heterosexuality as normative. Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* communicate the unspeakable experiences of lesbian women.

The shifting meanings of the ‘Black’ as a racial, cultural, national or political term and changing perspectives in the wake of postcolonial debates and issues has had crucial implications for black feminisms. Moraga and Anzaldúa’s *The Bridge Called My Back* is a crucial text that offers a scrutiny of class, race and cultural issues that question any notion of feminism as a stable place. The hegemony of United States is questioned and the difference between black Americans and Blacks highlighted as African-Americans are not a part of the third world. Critiques that acknowledge and accommodates of multiple black identities usher in new possibilities of representation.


### 6. CONCLUSION

A unique diaspora and a peculiar and exploitative institution had laid the foundation of black women’s experience in America. A distinct and unique Black Feminist consciousness had triggered the emergence of a black women’s literary movement as a conscious move to counter centuries of misrepresentation. Black feminist insurgency succeeded in delinking itself from the larger rubric of Western feminism to set an example for posterity. Reverberations of Sojourner Truth’s question “And Ain’t I a Woman?” forged the sisterhood between lived experience and literary representations to reinforce the black feminist theoretical standpoint. Despite the sustained debates and continuing critique of contemporary American black feminism’s counter canon as well as the individualistic self-assurance of twenty first century African-American feminists and dichotomies within black feminism in America, the fact remains that black feminism, since its inception in America has been a pioneering subaltern position that questioned and subverted racist, classist, sexist hegemonies.
7. REFERENCES

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