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Novels of Diaspora in Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory

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Abstract – To understand Black Feminist thinking, it is important to explore the context out of which it emerges. We will analyze the evolution of Black Feminist consciousness and thought in the 1930s to contemporary time, since the struggle for black women's liberation which emerged in the mid-1960s is a construction of both intellectual and activist tradition during slavery and during the anti-slavery movement. This course will also be an interpretative analysis of the work and thought produced by a range of leading black women writers, scholars and intellectuals in everyday and alternative locations for knowledge production. For purposes of this paper, Black Women encompasses all women of descent/heritage in the diaspora. These women all rely upon the notion that issues of race, gender, sexuality and social class are central, rather than peripheral to any history, analysis or assessment of life. During the course we will outline the basic principles and practices of Black Feminism, contextualize the emergence of contemporary feminist work in historical perspective and also examine the written and spoken texts of nineteenth century feminist foremothers. We will identify and characterize the major issues which black feminists address as well as the various forms of resistance to social structures. Black women will be viewed as producers of knowledge and as transforming agents. We will study the works and contributions of early feminists as well as later and contemporary scholars and activists.

Keywords: Black Feminist, Women's, Novels, Black, Intellectual, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Women, by her very construct refer to woe symbolically and epitomize pain or suffering which is her lot and by her gender identification woman, she is a mere extension of man. In other words, she is nobody without a man and hence is allowed and assumes only a relegated, subjugated or a subordinate position in the predominant phallogocentric society that is called patriarchy. It has been seen that the woman has been consistently marginalized and systematically exploited, resulting in the repression of her emotional, psychological, political, intellectual, social, artistic and economic freedom. This, the man has perpetually enforced through patriarchal decree to ensure his own power over the woman. From the very inception, when she makes her biological existence as a female, which is distinct, different and separate from her male counterpart, she is forced into a world of silence, marginality and denial. And she is assigned roles by patriarchy and all her identities are relational to and dependent on her male counterpart. As "the internalization of..... female identity as supplementary to and supporting of a male figure by women themselves is registered as the most disturbing indication of the deep seated influence of patriarchal ideology....." (Rita Felski)

When she first makes her entrance into the world, she has an identity only in relation to her male parent, not her female parent. Her life of denial deprives her of the prerequisite autonomy outside of the male. Her marginal or repressed existence deprives her of literacy, economic independence, emotional and political freedom etc. For him, "the woman is the absence of speaking; the speaking subject is not womanThus, woman as sign is the site of struggle between contradiction and repressions" (Meese).

In the next phase of life, when she is at puberty, the woman, perceived as a sexual object in the wifely role, ironically, is well insured against sexual or moral violation by any other male in the society. The third phase of her oppressed life is seen when she is forced into motherhood. In certain cultures, especially Hindu and Islamic, producing a male child is prerequisite for her existence. As a woman, she has no choice of her own.

In all three phases of her life, she plays one role after another. The early history of woman testifies to the fact that woman enjoyed a status, a position equal to that of her male counterpart, that was devoid of sexual exploitation, sex discrimination. But the fact remains that man/male, somehow made a conquest

of his woman and began relegating her. In due course of time, as societies formed and men as a group constituted an institution called patriarchy, he saw fit to become the sole owner of his woman and other female counterparts, compelling them to a circumscribed existence. Hence, "woman defined by negation, opposition of limitation and lack, is appropriated in the service of the male prerogative to define it....." (Meese)

The political movement that marked the beginning of the woman's open protest/war against her subordination, marginalization and exploitation and denial of right to voice, literacy and economy began much earlier, much before the women's movement of the 60s. Literacy also provided her avenues for self-expression and helped her project her thoughts, ideals, intellect and creativity that are distinct. Brought to America in the early part of 17th century to promote its capitalism, she was divested of her basic right to existence as a human being. What the vulnerable black woman experienced as she was forced to prepare herself for the slave market was the loss of the racial dignity and erosion of her humanity resulting of the repression of her own awareness of herself. The progenitors of the 20th century feminism and women right activists were fighting for sexual/social equality not for all women but only for white women. Their struggle was fortified by their claim that the black women craved sex inordinately and hence were immoral and hence legitimized their fear that they might catch the Negro disease.

Feminism as an ideology seeking equality for woman was a welcome stance to most black women. As "the feminist movement... concerned with the oppression of the women as a class, but is almost totally composed of white females. Thus the black women find themselves on the outside of both political entities, inspire of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression (Lindsay)". Though poetry and drama dominated the black literary scene in the 60s and 70s, Toni Morrison has, as a novelist, made an indelible mark on the annals of Black women's writing through a changed focus in her discourse. Toni Morrison summed up predicament of black women in America in such a way:

"The black woman had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself".

So the researcher will try to discover a consistent pattern in Toni Morrison Novels which is the quest and the attendant realization of female selfhood through the exploration of female creativity from the historic slavery to the present capitalism. An attempt will be made in this proposed work to study the image of the woman as metaphor for creativity, in the novels of Toni Morrison.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Sojourner Truth's narrative entitled "Narrative and Book of Life" (1878) delineates the multiple oppression of a black woman, her loss, her denial and her traumatic life as a woman. The novel opens with a characteristic white text child primer, conjuring a picture of an ideal white family structure. "Here is the family, Mother, Father, Dick and Jane lives in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. ." Morrison's use of the primer is to undermine the ideal white family unit, not applicable to the black family structure.

Maud Martha (1953) depicts Maud's life that is confined to her husband and her conflict generated by skin colour as her husband is light skinned. Maud finally realizes that her self-definition as a woman and as an individual are both important. This female awareness corresponds to and anticipates feminist movement of the 60s.

Paule Marshall delves into the psyche of Silla, a West Indian immigrant, a first generation American whose conflict is borne out of her inability to come to terms with her West Indian culture and the white capitalism that tries to lure her in *Brown Girl Brownstones* (1955). Marshall delineates the conflict of Silla Boyce as a mother and a wife that she has internalized and her own attempts at self-definition through economic independence symbolized by Brownstone that clash with her husband Deighton's search for creativity. The novel explores the black's problem of assimilation and materialism.

Sojourner Truth's narrative entitled "Narrative and Book of Life" (1878) reveals her feminist stance, first, in her defiance of the white rule escaping to North, and finding her way into the forbidden arena to express her woman's pain, through her own slave narrative. What can be argued is that neither her slave life nor the atrocities inflicted on her could prevent her from articulating her traumatic life, which has contributed significantly to the women's writing and hence provides an African-American women's cultural continuum.

Nella Larsen novel entitled "Quicksand" (1928) explores the conflict of the female protagonist, Helga Cran, concerning her identity though she could easily be passed on as white. As has been discerned, "the tragic mulatto theme reveals the conflict of values that blacks faced as a conquered people". The novel explore the protagonists search for ideal American women, who are pure, refined, genteel, beautiful, well cared for, but distorted by racism, but also underscores their conflicts if they conform to the white ideal. This is invariably the conflict about 'passing' between their searches for the ideal and their contrary instincts became the focus of the writers of that time. The women writers' attempt at a rejection of negative female stereotypes in turn contradicted with the protagonist search for self-identity since, the

stereotypes were differed from the internalized reality of their times.

CONCLUSION:

Each of these plays looks at what it is to be a woman, and how to survive as one in a patriarchal and colonial society inscribed by class, race and gender. From Aidoo's play set in the nineteenth century, to Gibson's play situated in the present, women's writings have determinedly used feminist criticism. Based on their specific experiences as members of a race and gender, these authors are resolved to speak in their own distinct voices. Even though neither continental nor diaspora African women fully subscribed to the feminist movement at its inception for reasons examined above, it does not mean they are unaware of the fact of their oppression, as Tommy says, "I don't have to wait for anybody's by-your-leave to be a 'Wine in the Wilderness'". Brown-Guillory puts the roles of the two liberation movements in a correct perspective saying "black women, in particular, made significant gains as a result of the Black Power and women's movements."¹⁸ What both the gender and racial liberation struggles have done is to give black feminist thought an anchor and a platform respectively to structure and present their own perspectives.

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