ON BEING A BLACK WOMAN IN WHITE AMERICA

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Abstract:

African American women have struggled for a place in society since they were brought to America as slaves. They performed strenuous labor and gave birth to children who often were taken away from them. After slavery and well into the twentieth century, it was women who were able to find jobs (most often as housekeepers, cooks, and maids), which allowed the African American family to survive financially. At the same time, African American women have been viewed as intellectually inferior to men. When confronted by negative stereotypes from society as a whole or even from the African American community itself, African American women have not given in to defeat. They have continued to rise and to demand their rightful place in society. As individuals, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers, they have worked within their families, in their jobs, and in their communities to search for and create a sense of themselves as African Americans and women.

Key Words: African American, Women, Black, Oppression, Patriarchal.

African American women writers have created women characters who pass on their knowledge of life and survival through their culture and history from one generation to the next. These characters are neither perfect nor flawed. They are all trying to survive in an imperfect world that judges them because of the color of their skin and their gender. This knowledge enables the next generation of African American women to rise above the conditions in which they live and to reach a new level of understanding about life and about what it means to be an African American woman. They reveal the black women's efforts to redefine black womanhood. Particularly, the works show the common theme of women locating women-centered places for articulating black women's existence and identities outside powers that distort African American women's realities. To change the controlled and distorted images of African American women and to realize black women's autonomy, a radical change must take place within black female psyches in

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response to white dominant ideology. The transformation, in the case of black female subjectivity, comes out of a changed black female consciousness regarding how African American women see themselves. When African American women realize a new consciousness, black female autonomy and self-determination will emerge. As Lorde asserts, patriarchal oppression cannot be dismantled by using the master's tools that perpetuate white male domination. The change for black women in this situation is realized when African American women "dwell in the Beyond," or Third Space, and define the terms by which they are judged. Towards this effort, this study considers the physical and psychological spaces in which African American women writers realize black female identity and autonomy.

During the last decade, black writing has moved forward on two clear fronts, the commercial and in respect to content, by which I mean this: a wider audience has opened for a few black writes, and the seldom-discussed experience of black women has, like the experience of women in general, been thematized in literature, there by bringing to light new or very old levels of social discrimination the nation needs to deal with. Phenomenologically, the questions raised by feminists strike as deeply at the presuppositions of culture and esthetics as the radical critiques of Black Nationalists and Surfictionists of an earlier era. Although the literary struggle of the sexes must be as old as the plays of Aristophanes, the modern emergence of a "woman's perspective" can only be regarded as a revolutionary, objective step forward in culture and consciousness, one that sensitizes us to the relativity of truth.

Facile generalizations about the parallels between the struggle of blacks and women for status ignore the complexity and distinctiveness of the history of black women, a history that reaches from the legacy of their African past and slave experience to their experience with industrialization and modern corporate America. My readings of contemporary Afro-American novels by black women provide the necessary context or subtext for a better understanding of why black women are primarily concerned with how racism, sexism and classism have influenced the development of love, power, autonomy, creativity, manhood, and womanhood in the black family and community.

In pursuing these themes black women novelists provide a much neglected perspective and chorus of voices of the human experience, but, contrary to the assumptions of same critics, this does not necessarily mean that their works constitute a distinctive literary tradition. The absence, silence, or misrepresentation of black women in literary and nonliterary texts or context by black men as well as white men and women is now commonplace knowledge. Many black women novelists employ to a greater or lesser degree

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the following signs and structures: motifs of interlocking racist, sexist and classist oppression; black female protagonists; spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; a centrality of female bonding or networking; a sharp focus on personal relationship in the family and community; deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions; iconography of women's clothing; and black female language (Smith 1985: 168-85).

But many black women writers, including feminists, who acknowledge the influence of male as well as female literary fore parents, underscore the problematic of a separate black female literary tradition. Mary Helen Washington argues for a black female literary tradition in her introduction to *Midnight Birds*:

> Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, and, even through they can claim a rightful place in the Afro-American tradition and the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear, for purposes of liberation black women writers will first insist on their name, their own space (Washington, 1943).

Because there are many intertextual parallels between black male and female novelists, readers should examine these parallels to determine the distinctiveness, consistency, and frequency of their appearance and use in narratives by black women in deciding for themselves whether a separate black female literary tradition exists.

The participation in the civil rights movement, the ambivalence about the black power movement especially its male chauvinism, and the boredom with their actual or expected lives as suburban housewives spurred many American women more than a century to renewed activism for women's rights. To cite Hull, "Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (Hull, 15).

Although drafted in 1977 by a radical group of primarily New York black feminist and lesbians, this statement nevertheless crystallizes the alienation of many black women from the Euro-American feminist movement:

> We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is

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> such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e. g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.
>
> Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppression. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism (Ibid.).

Historian Jacqueline Jones quotes Michele Wallace's 1982 observation that "despite a sizable number of Black feminists who have contributed much to the leadership of the women's movement, there is still no Black women's movement, and it appears there won't be for some time to come". The conjoining of race and sex thematized the black experience in unexplored ways, but it triples the number of philosophical and political dilemmas to be resolved in the pursuit of selfhood. Du Bois might have said of black women writers of the 1980's that they ever feel their "three ness; an American, a Negro, a woman; three souls, tree thoughts, tree warring ideals in one dark body". We should also return to a point made by Joanna Russ in her essay "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Can't Women Write". Well, obviously they can. But, as Russ tells us, the Life words of the women characters we have looked at differ significantly from those of black male writers in many important ways. They are generally about sexual and domestic relationships. For the most part, they are worlds centered on the home, child rising, and service on political organizations. The result, and our reward as readers, is that these women have a sharper eye for the small nuances and tics and eccentricities of human behavior than their male counterparts do. The implication is that as social options increase for black women, their fictional worlds will expand, developing a repertoire of subjects, themes, forms, and genres as seemingly boundless as their gifts for poetry and song.

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