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EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN FROM POWER DISCOURSES: A STUDY OF BLACK
WOMENS' WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Black writings had its beginnings in the experienced reality of hardships and cruelty to which the Blacks were subjected to in America. African-American life is conditioned by the interlocking system of race and gender in which identity is continually re-discovered and re-defined. With a selection of certain novels of Black women, this paper wants to draw attention to the manifold contributions of Black women's writing both to a cosmopolitan literary and cultural heritage of women, as well as to international Gender Studies. This paper argues that culture and society wields power which is employed in constructing individuals and determining the mode of behaviour. The focus on the female protagonist highlights the reaction from the society on individuals who refuse to operate within the acceptable scheme of things. By refusing to operate within the boundaries of power as set by culture, she upsets the order and is thus isolated. Gender plays a critical role in the exercise of this power especially when women contest the traditional construction of woman. Black woman is a victim of multiple oppression and double marginalization, of race and gender. The objective of this study is to analyze the *nature* and intensity of multiple oppressions which Black women undergo in racist America and the possible amelioration through female bonding or solidarity. This study shows how Black feminist sisterhood helps Black women in the novel to liberate themselves from the men, from cruelty, tyranny and hegemony perpetuated by a racist and patriarchal society. Finally this paves a way to the empowerment of the Black female through various sisterhoods.

Keywords: Power discourses, Black women, empowerment of women, Black novels, racism, sexism, womanism, sisterhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a struggle when cultural expectations and pressures are not favourable, and it is more difficult to write when one is aware of the possibility of negative criticism. Unlike other stirrings in society, the struggle of women relies heavily on literature. Their protest is against the underlying ideology of society and is, as a result, destined to face open hostility. Literature turns out to be the only available vehicle for their self-expression and empowerment.

Black writings had its beginnings in the experienced reality of hardships and cruelty to which the Blacks were subjected to in America. African-American life is conditioned by the interlocking system of race and gender in which identity is continually re-discovered and re-defined. Race and gender as power discourses have made heavy inroads into the lives of African-Americans. Black woman is a victim of multiple oppression and multiple marginalization. As Black, woman and poor, African-American woman has to find her own identity.

RACE AND GENDER AS POWER DISCOURSES

The term racism refers to the discrimination of people on the basis of race or ethnicity. It is an ethnocentric discrimination. In the American context, the term racism is synonymous with the discrimination or prejudice against the Blacks or the African-Americans and other Hispanic races by the White. The term denotes the marginalization or segregation of the coloured or visible minorities by the Whites.

Racism is the theory or idea that there is a link between inherited physical traits of personality and culture. The politics of racism has assumed greater significance in the context of the considerable numerical strength of the Black community in America. In this regard, Calvin C. Hernton remarks:

Racism is a man-made, man enforced phenomenon...may be defined as all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group; whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group; behaviour and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race. (*Sex and Racism in America*,175)

Being White in colour implies a series of connotations: of being attractive, both physically and culturally, desirable, intelligent, reasonable and above all worthy of love. Blackness is seen as a negative sign, a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled, irrational behaviour, violent sexuality and so on.

In short, black symbolizes everything negative and sordid in life, culture and religion. To be worthy of love one has to be beautiful; to be beautiful one has to be white in colour. The poor Negro has no place in this scheme. It leads him to nowhere; as an inherent part of America (not Africa) he too wants to fit into this pattern terribly. That which is unattainable becomes the most agonizingly desirable for all humanity. So the Black man's soul-wrenching desire for whiteness is an indirect desire for love, respectability, honour and acceptance. It is an agonizing human experience.

The term sex is a biological construct. It refers to the anatomical difference between the male and the female. The term sexism refers to the discrimination of people on the basis of sex. Gender is a social construct. It refers to the difference in social relationship due to difference in sex. Women have been universally discriminated against both at home and in society. Being a woman means that she must play a subordinate role in the society and must be submissive to her male kin. Women's subordinate role in society results in unequal access to material resources. They are circumscribed by cultural restrictions associated with youth rites, marriage and motherhood. The peculiarity of gender in contrast to other forms of oppression, like class, caste or race, is that gender involves a dimension of intimacy that touches both the performer and the victim.

In every known society, past or present, the female is in some sense subordinate to the male. This subordination is found at two levels. First, the females are subordinate to the male governing of the communal structures. The "public" sphere, which includes the exercise of overall governmental authority, is the domain of males in every society. Secondly, females are also customarily subordinate to males on a more personal level within the family. In all societies, women are personally subordinate to a husband, father, uncle or other male figure. This second type of subordination is minimal in societies in which adult males play only insignificant, peripheral roles in family life. But it has some symbolic significance even in these societies.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiographical account of Maya Angelou that demonstrates how love for literature and having a strong character can play a significant role in overcoming racism and distress. In the course of the story, it is evident that Maya changes from being a casualty of racism to become a young women with self- dignity and identity that helps her to overcome prejudice. The context of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* focuses on the problems associated with racism that was prevalent in the southern

states. Racist oppression is a common theme in the book that is portrayed by all the major characters; in fact, all the other themes in the book are closely related to racism, identity and segregation.

Maya Angelou, the author of *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*, writes about a girl who is confronted with sex, rape and racism at an early stage in her life in detail in her novel. When Maya is three years old, her parents have a divorce and send her and her brother from California to Arkansas to live with their paternal grandmother in a town that is divided by color and full of racism. Stamps, Arkansas, as depicted in *Caged Bird*, have very little social ambiguity. It is a racist world divided between Black and white, male and female. There they are raised by her grandmother and then sent back to their care free mother in the absence of a father figure.

At the age of eight, Maya is raped by her mother's boyfriend while she is sleeping in her mother's bed. The book also tells about her other sexual experiences during the early parts in her life. Those experiences lead to the birth of her first child. Throughout the book, we come across many racist things. It is painful to read about the hateful treatment of Blacks during that time and the effect it had on Black Children. When Maya had a bad tooth her grandmother took her to a white dentist in town. The white dentist refused to help Maya because, as he stated, "I would rather put my hand in the mouth of a dog than to put it into a nigger's mouth"(33). This incident shows the rude treatment faced by Blacks in those days.

In the world of Maya, beauty is narrowly defined as being white, with blond hair and blue eyes. Maya believes as a child that being black means being ugly and thinks of her appearance as a black ugly dream that she will wake out of. As a little girl, Maya already has it in her head that white girls are sugar, spice and everything nice. Racism has already made its world into Maya's world. Maya says that:

I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil. (3)

Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, is a rhapsody of joy and triumph: the triumph of one woman's crusade against racism, sexism and socially imposed traditions. Written in the epistolary form in an incandescently clear and impassioned language, heated with love and rage, it tells the story of Celie, a battered Black woman, who along with a few other Black women stand together to finally emerge triumphant over a world which marginalizes them. Steven Spielberg has immortalized the novel by making it into a motion picture of the same title. This novel portrays the devastating effects of social and racial oppression and the adverse effects it had on the victims. In almost all her works, Walker deals with the suppression of women in family and society. With her African-American ethos, she views the problem of gender politics as cultural stereotypes that make women social, physical and emotional victims of male hegemony.

The relation between Miss Sofia and her White charge, Miss Eleanor Jane serves an analogous function for the American South. The enslavement of the Black woman Sofia is depicted very pathetically in the novel. Sofia is a big, strong healthy girl about seven or eight months pregnant, when she first appeared in the novel as the wife of Harpo: "Harpo so black he thinks she bright, but she ain't that bright" (32). Sofia did not allow Harpo to dominate her completely. Sofia decides that Harpo is not able to treat her with respect anymore and leaves the house. Then Harpo finds refuge in Mary Agnes, an yellow skinned woman whom he calls "Squeak." This results in a violent encounter between Sofia and Mary Agnes. After asserting herself before Mary, she drives away with a prizefighter named Hentry Broadax or Buster. This incident reveals the true nature of Sofia. She is one who resists any sort of oppression.

One of the theories that has evolved out of the Black feminist movement is Alice Walker's Womanism. Black Feminist groups were formed with the writings of many theorists like Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberle Crenshaw. One of these groups is The Combahee River Collective, founded by Barbara Smith.

Alice Walker, in the preface to her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* gives a detailed definition of the new term. It has clearly evolved as she wrote *The Color Purple*; she concludes her definition with a descriptive statement that "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (1). The term "womanism" epitomizes the process of Walker's growth from her first book *Once*, to the last. It

indicates her pivotal position in the evolution of the women's movement of the 1980's. In defining her new term Walker combines the critical elements of her works: the importance of Black folk history, the centrality of female creativity and competence in that history as symbolized by the quilt. Her belief in the oneness of life and the sacredness of nature are often embodied in her works by the image of the tree which also represents the fusion of the sensual and the spiritual as inseparable from the demand for justice.

Walker explains that womanist is derived from "womanish," a Black folk expression used by mothers to female children "referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour" (1). It is this view of woman as a grown up, in contrast to the Western view that woman is a helpless, incompetent being, that Walker puts into the texture of her work. Walker stresses that a womanist is not a separatist; she makes connections where they exist. She sees the relationship between the preference to women's culture and the survival of an entire people, women and men. She stresses that a womanist loves other women, sexually and /or non-sexually; but that sexual preference is not an essential part of her definition. Instead, what is essential is that she loves herself. It is that love of self that is the impetus for her commitment to women and men and to struggle for justice. Walker ends her definition with a chant in which the word love is predominant. A womanist, as she chants; "Loves music, Loves dance, Loves the moon, Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves herself" (1). Walker's definition of a womanist highlights qualities that many people do not associate with feminism. At the core of this definition is a woman's love of herself that is integrated with her love for all living things.

It is noteworthy that a womanist "Loves Struggle." It is this quality that is easily evident in Walker's works: the capacity to ask questions that is uncomfortable, even subversive, which point to truth. Only when one trusts one's experiences, tempered by the illustrative depth of history, can one truly love oneself. For Walker, this is an invaluable quality explicit in African-American women's history. Without this, they cannot hold on to their creative spark. Given the impact of racism and sexism, it is not surprising that the works of Black women have been studied by literary critics in terms of the expression of their history and culture, as Black and female. In her acclaimed volume of essays, Walker introduces four meanings of the term "womanist." According to Walker's first definition, a "womanist" is "a Black feminist or feminist of color" (xi). At some basic level, Walker herself uses the two terms as being virtually interchangeable. Like Walker, many African-American women see little difference between the two as both support a common agenda of Black women's self-definition and self-determination.

African-American womanism is characterized by female bonding or solidarity and it surprisingly enlists male support. The womanist lacks the radicalism of the Western feminists. In spite of that, she gains a lot of ground in the fight against sexist segregation. A womanist, like every other feminists, seeks to raise awareness on the plight of women who struggle to co-exist in a man's world where they are regarded as appendages.

Resolution of the conflict between Black and White women is not possible until all women acknowledge that a feminist movement which is racist and classicist is a cover-up for women's continued bondage to materialistic, patriarchal principles. This kind of "sisterhood" that is necessary for the making of feminist revolution can be achieved only when all women disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy and competition with one another that has made them vulnerable, weak and unable to envision new realities. This kind of sisterhood cannot be forged by mere concepts or theories. It is the result of continued growth and change. It is a goal to be reached, a process of becoming. The process begins with action, with the individual women's refusal to accept any set of myths, stereotypes and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of her human experience. It results from her will to subvert the mystique that denies her, the capacity to bridge gaps created by racism, sexism, classism or her ability to change. The process begins with the individual woman's acceptance that American women, without exception, are socialized to be racist, classist and sexist, in varying degrees. The feminist label does not change the fact that they must consciously work to rid themselves of the legacy of negative socialization.

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou's novels portray the twin issues of racism and sexism and the devastating effects of racial and sexual oppression of Black women. It tells the story of battered Black women, who stand the oppression to finally emerge triumphant over a world which marginalizes them.

Through her novels, Walker provides the reader with a microcosm of the African-American world with its peculiar intimacies, sorrows and hopes. Through her novels, Maya Angelou supplies something special to the world of literature, especially personal points of view on the predicament of being Black and a female in America.

In both novels, Walker and Maya examine Black women's struggle, the courageous fight they put up against a racist and sexist society that suppresses their growth towards selfhood and wholeness. The struggle in itself requires the need to reach an understanding of the racial past, as a meaningful part of the present, in order to redeem the self. Moreover, developing a consciousness to inherit the Black heritage renews the Black woman's sense of race and place, expanding her vision into a larger world. Celie, in *The Color Purple*, re-visualizes the sense of female community to find her true self. Maya Angelou's work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* deals with her transformation from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice. From an apprehensive child growing up in a small town in Arkansas, Maya has evolved into an influential, wise and respected woman.

This study shows how Black feminist sisterhood, helps the women in the novel to liberate themselves from the men, from cruelty, violence and selfishness. Finally this paves a way to the empowerment of the female characters through various sisterhoods. As Black, woman, and poor, the African-American woman has to generate her own definition in order to survive. She finds that she has been denied the essential aspects of herself to fit into the definition of others. If defined as Black, her woman nature is often overlooked; if defined as a woman, her Blackness is ignored; if defined as working class, her gender and race are muted. It is primarily in the expressions of her that she can find the totality of her identity. The result of that expression is the articulation of the interconnectedness of race, sex and class as a conceptual basis for the pattern of dominance and hierarchy in this society.

Through her art and genius, through her American experiences and an African racial heritage, the African-American woman writer finds her right space in modern literary America. Having made a determined stand against racism and sexism, she tries to wrest the long-promised equality from White, male dominated society for the Black community. The women characters in Walker's novels form strong bonds, which develop into a community, radiating love and sisterhood. Love of self energizes them to the point that they break their chains of enslavement; change their own worlds, times and Black men. As Celie and other women overcome their condition, not a single man is killed or injured. The subtlety with which Walker shows how this is achieved is remarkable. Instead of "hiding" in their separate cells, the women come together in sisterhood and overcome by nurturing, befriending, enlightening, sharing and loving each other, which makes each individual woman whole. This is a positive way for both men and women, highlighted by Celie and Albert becoming friends in the end. She teaches and Albert listens. Albert stops hating himself so much, and he and Celie share their thinking and feelings as equals. They were never lovers. But now, at the beginning of a new day, they can be lovers, if they ever wish to.

Walker and Maya's novels foreground the healing powers of female friendship that soothes pain and makes it possible for women to survive prejudice. These different forms of oppression urge women to form bonds in order to fight back. Indeed, female friendship allows women to face adversity and challenge the attempts to subjugate them. The success of their novels demonstrates the strength of female friendship that liberates women from the burden of oppression and gives them a chance to empower each other. This survival over patriarchy is indeed vital and highlights the nurturing, and caring qualities of female bonding that makes this liberation possible and allows women to heal the wounds contracted through the process.

CONCLUSION

Despite the different cultural and social realities that the Walker and Maya's novels describe, they have worked together because they all acknowledge the potentiality of female friendship. This study uses a

specific theory of female friendship which mainly focuses on the nurturing, caring, exchanges, giving and receiving counsel and sharing experiences. The friendship impacts the lives of the subjects as a whole and helps them resolve all sorts of problems. The sisterhood reaches out various aspects of the characters' lives and allows them to benefit from all their interactions and endeavors. The study also highlights the support and comfort between women which give them the opportunity to extend their friendship to female solidarity that involves more women who may also benefit from this sisterhood. Indeed, this female solidarity may not only involve more women which may impact the community but also participate in nation building.

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