



Scrutinizing the Construction of the Black Female *Persona* in African-American Narratives

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Abstract: *This article is a panoramic survey of the construction of the black female persona, which refers to both the role and character adopted by an author, and the aspect of the characters' character that others either presented or perceived. It lays bare the historical experiences whose negative side effects are markedly noticeable through black women's daily interactions and interrelations in some American literary texts. Using black feminism and queer theories, the paper emphasizes how, after years of bondage, new subtler ways of subjugation give to the reader an idea of black female's realities in a white racist, white and male-dominated country. To this end, it historicizes the black female subject as it explores the historical actuality, authenticity, and factuality that account for the 'a priori' male-hegemony approach, the interrelatedness of white supremacy, and male superiority that has characterized their reality in a situation of struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds informed by societal gender constructions, conceptions, attitudes, and practices.*

Keywords: *patriarchy, literature, race, gender, characters, Africa, America.*

1. INTRODUCTION

When referring to gender disparities in black communities in the United States of America, with their respective realities, one is hinting at the existing differences between men and women that are socially contrasted. These differences can include stereotypical beliefs, such as 'men are stronger than women' and 'women are the weaker sex,' 'men are superior to women,' 'women should stay at home and take care of the household and the children,' etc. Focusing on these beliefs, standards, and stereotypes, many African-American male writers and their other white American counterparts produce literary texts, such as novels, poems, novellas that often embody these societal rules and beliefs.

Therefore, as a way of conveying messages and spreading a way of life, beliefs, and practices in society, intellectuals to strengthen societal rules and gender-oriented standards have used literature. Aiming at teaching and entertaining as well as making them known and enforced, literature also contributes in revealing the different and typical images of women. The latter have always been sources of concern in American literature in particular in such a way that male writers, both black and white, could not help dealing with the issues and giving them their own features through a masculine sensibility and prism. Consequential to that, many American male-authored texts had a common depiction of women, which, according to feminist groups, tended to demean them in society, regarding them as second-class citizens because of their skin color and gender status. In fact, aware of what they view as a 'negative' depiction of their female counterparts in some men's works of art, many male authors have been accused of (re)producing in their writings 'degrading', 'humiliating' and 'submissive' treatments inflicted on the female subject under the racial and patriarchal ideology. Female characters in American literature are then often depicted as belonging to either the city-type women with loss of moral values because of men's tyranny or rural-type women that abide by societal rules and values, known as society's archetypal women.

Therefore, it would be interesting to bring to light how male writers have depicted women in their literary works. In this regard, it becomes relevant to explore the case of black women in American society and the impact race and gender consciousness have in their daily lives. Moreover, there is also

the impact of centuries of subjugation, ranging from slavery to economic and political segregation and *a partheidization* or discrimination as markedly noted through their daily interactions and interrelations within and without their community. To that end, it becomes a prerequisite to lay bare the commonalities and differences that appear at the surface when scrutinizing the construction of the black female persona in American literature by both Black and White authors. This should emphasize how, after years of bondage, new subtler ways of subjugation give to the reader an idea of black female's realities in white racist, white and male-dominated society. The dominant-dominated situation urges Kattie Conon to argue that throughout the history of the United States of America, the interrelatedness of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle. The latter is an expression of a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white privileged and oppressive, and the other black, exploited and oppressed (Collins 1991: 22).

In American society, marked by oppression and exploitation, male superiority, and white supremacy, and where the Constitution stipulates that people were born equal, black females bear the brunt of racism and sexism, bear the brunt of their expenses as well, which are only designed to devalue black womanhood and motherhood. However, the previously mentioned subjugation inflicted on them has some causes and manifestations that explain the racist and sexist attitudes that are predominant in almost all communities. The paper delves into *queer* and black feminism theories that give rise to the understanding of their position within the intra cultural network of sexism, class oppression, and racism (Jennifer 2003). This accounts first for the experience of being a Black woman to be elucidated via intersectionality for which Crenshaw argues that "*each concept, being Black and being female, should be considered independently while understanding that intersecting identities compound upon and reinforce one another*" (Kimberly 1989: 140). The second has to do with the fact that *queer* theory is concerned with any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories under the predominant hetero normativity context.

Therefore, through a panoramic survey, the article brings into play patriarchy and white supremacy. It historicizes the black female subject under the racialism and patriarchy ideology that accounts for the 'a priori' male-hegemony approach in white and black authors' construction of their fictional female characters and its correlation with some societal gender constructions, conceptions, attitudes, and practices such as femininity and motherism. To that end, it analyzes the black female subject under the American society's racialism and patriarchy ideology and uncovers the 'a priori' male-hegemony approach the American artistic landscape.

2. HISTORICIZING THE BLACK FEMALE SUBJECT UNDER THE AMERICAN SOCIETY'S RACIALISM AND PATRIARCHISM IDEOLOGY

Black people were brought to the United States of America to work as enslaved people on the sugar, coffee, tobacco plantations, and mines. After gaining their freedom in this cosmopolitan society, another political system was set up to dominate them anew, as well prevent them from beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. The political system was known as segregation and discrimination, a policy that regulated relations between white and black Americans, reaching its peak with the 1877 Jim Crow Law as state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. Under the system that sanctioned racial segregation and political and economic discrimination, people, especially women who also fell prey to the White-patriarchal system, were provided less freedom and fewer opportunities for their self-affirmation. The practice required separate housing, education and other services for them because of the impossibility of coexistence between the two races. In this regard, examining patriarchy and White supremacy in American society paves the way for a thorough view of black female subjects' plights as well as their construction in male-authored texts within the patriarchal and racist system. To this end, looking at first the past seems to be a precondition since, as Robert Staples states, "*we cannot understand the present or predict the future if we do not understand the past. The use of historical data helps us discover the constant elements of the racist conditions under which the Black women have lived*" (Angela 1983: 4). James Baldwin who reasons that the coherence of the present lies in the understanding of the past backs the idea.

Thus, digging up from bygone days helps [us] to realize that the devaluation of black womanhood originated then from history, when the United States of America, living under slavery and profiting from the vulnerability and accessibility of female slaves, had imposed an ideology which forced them

to accept, through torture and deprivation, a [white] patriarchal definition of femininity and womanhood. The latter provided and enforced by the ruling white folk proves that the United States of America has always been a white-supremacist society. Women have then to face two hindering and subjugating ideologies, which accounts for their doubly oppressed status that cages them into abject poverty and limits their possibilities. That situation has undoubtedly affected their husbands, children, and family life as a whole.

In fact, the American racialism and patriarchism ideology set forth four cardinal virtues that are associated with ‘true womanhood,’ according to which “*modesty, sexual purity, innocence, and submissive manner were the qualities associated with womanhood and femininity that enslaved Black women endeavored to attain, even though the conditions under which they lived continually undermined their efforts*”(Collins 1991: 49). Such an ideological extolling did not concern enslaved black female whom white people coerced into accepting their supposed ‘inferiority.’ Moreover, the demeaning system they were victims of found a favorable ground on the fundamental Christian teachings that advocated their subjugation and submission all the more as they were considered to be ‘evil sexual temptress’ and as the ‘originator of sexual sin,’ thus reinforcing their second-class citizenship position.

Consequently, the trappings of racial, sexist, political, and patriarchal stereotypes are the medium through which the White patriarchal ideology percolates black people’s mentalities and black and white authors construct their fictional black female subjects in their narratives. It is then under that backdrop that many of them have established race and gender patterns, and standards after which what they deem as society’s ethical and normative behaviors are featured on. Even some black male-authored texts that have emerged from the ‘protest literature’ trend adopted the same attitude, resulting in an internalization of such political and cultural stereotypes as a way of perpetuating the rule of patriarchy within both American black and white communities.

Moreover, in a society imbued with sexism and racialism ideologies, whose main foci are people of African descent, black women fall easy prey to misogynist attitudes by white men, white women, and black men in view of their vulnerability. Such triangular violent attitudes and behaviors are more than endemic to the black community as a whole. They are also often misguided toward black females who entertain a morbid fear for prospective sexual assaults. The sexual aggression threats some are victims of in a literary environment stitched with violence have compelled Laura E. Tanner to argue that “*the very possibility of rape serves as a cultural dividing line that enforces a hierarchy of autonomy in which the male, free to think, imagine and acts without fear of sexual violation, is always in a position of power*”(1983: 86).

3. THE ‘A PRIORI’ MALE-HEGEMONY APPROACH: PATRIARCHY AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Throughout American literature, black and white male-authored texts have been depicted women in many different ways. Authors’ personal experiences and women’s frequent societal stereotypes and positions have often influenced their portrayal. More often than not, male authors tend to reproduce an interpretation they consider their communities’ views of women in a completely different nature that a female author would. For example, while F. Scott Fitzgerald represents his main characters as victims in the late 1920’s, Zora Neale Hurston portrays hers as strong, free-spirited, and independent women only a decade later. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1977) Nick, the narrator portrays the main female character, Daisy Buchanan, only by her superficial qualities. Guided only by Nick’s limited view of her, the reader often judges Daisy solely on the aforementioned basis. What the reader then sees, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s narrative through the eye of Nick, only appears as a woman whose impatience and desire for wealth and luxury cost her, the love of her life, Gatsby.

Indeed, an interesting approach to the topic of women and literature is to see if male fictions have reflected their real working roles. As delineated in their literary texts, the female subjects are mostly engaged in farm labor, jobs that are extensions of their nurturing roles, factory works, especially in the early textile and clothing mills, and housework. Rarely are they depicted as protagonists if only ‘odd-job women’ in the house. In some novels by male writers communities and families are primarily populated by Blacks who wield some semblance of power, but who are in reality just ‘cogs in the wheel’ evolving and operating in a White-governed society that lives by capitalism-dominated institutions that exclude both black male and female subjects. Because “*African-American women*

share the common experience of being black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent,” (Tanner 1983: 22) some male authors’ plots shaped race-oriented and gender-based settings that ostracize them from all the opportunities that American mainstream society offers. Experiencing segregation and discrimination, the racist ideology confined them in ghettos where they fight night and day to survive, to get rid of poverty, and emerge in their communities. Thus, like those of Fitzgerald’s, many male-authored texts’ in-depth depiction of black American lives are accounts of how they evolve in the pervasive squalor that prevails in the black American ghettos, undermines, and thwarts any economic progress and moral uplifting for black women.

More to the point, against the backdrop of racialism and patriarchy ideologies, women are portrayed as beautiful, passive, motherly or erotic or as whores, as only good at making children and having sex. It is only later on that the reader encounters their featuring as victims of the American political system and symbols. Therefore, the African-American male writers’ novel genre develops a major paradigm which sets the tone in the writings of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and Ralph Ellison to name but a few. Their literary narratives, which were at the very beginning and only designed to liberate the black race from White folk’s yoke that instituted the debasing *apartheidized* political system of segregation and discrimination, and uplift them, often turn into sexual differences between black men and their black sisters, and black men and white women. These circumstances usher in black male novelists to channel their efforts “*on the social, economic and educational advancement of black men as the leaders of the race*” (McKay 1990: 236). Such a prevailing paradigm forces black females to silence in black authors’ novels. Referring to Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Calvin C. Hernton muses over this reality, affirming, “*nothing at all is said about womenfolk. The fact of a singular dominance in Native Son is sufficiently indicative of the novel’s overriding phallic perspective*” (Hernton 1987: 64). Most outstandingly of all is Richard Wright’s reading of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) which he has described as demeaning for the female subject. He reads, “*the sensory sweep of the novel carries no message, no thought*” (Johnson 1990: 153).

The reason for black men’s reading of Zora Neale Hurston’s literary texts as downgrading a narrative can be explained by the rebellious stance she embraces in her novel. She celebrates black women’s freedom, which is slammed as a fact compromising men’s leading position and, thus, challenging the ‘two-perpetrator patriarchal ideology’ who are both black men and white men. No tribute, whatsoever, is paid to them for their core contributions to black men’s lives. They are most of the time delineated under painful features and characterizations with no spirituality and nurturing a sense of personal responsibility for their own plights and questioned and questionable morality. The female archetypal loose and fake-figure some male writers depict discards and denies black women any attention and care in society. As citizens relegated to a second-class status in male works, they receive, if any, only passing emphasis as a way of reproducing and deepening their ‘invisibility’ to paraphrase Ralph Ellison with his novel entitled *The Invisible Man* (1952). Still in line with the treatments they are faced with in male writings, particularly in *Native Son* (1940), Barbara E. Johnson has a critical look on the issue so far as to wonder “*where in Richard Wright does the black woman stand with respect to the man’s writing?*” (Johnson 1990: 151).

In doing so, male writers have always attempted, with no grounded reason, to negate women’s dignity and humanity, thus stealing their voices and silencing them in society, they are part of and contributor to. Women are not, in any way, happy or seldom are they in the era of the ‘protest literature’ insofar as they are confined in only traditional submissive roles as mothers, sisters, wives, prostitutes or whores, and supportive of their male partners, be they boyfriends or husbands. Many black women characters’ values are weighed up in society according to the contribution they make to their male counterparts’ progress and evolution. This prompts Harris Trudier, in analyzing James Baldwin’s fiction, to write that black women are incomplete individuals without black males who can only help shape their sense of wholeness in the segregated and discriminated American society, pinpointing:

However, no woman is ultimately so acceptable to Baldwin that she is to be viewed as equal to the prominent male characters. It is a function of their guilt as well as of their creation that most of the Black female characters in Baldwin’s fiction have been subordinated to the males; they are in a supportive, serving position in relation to the males and the male images in their lives (1985: 9).

Baldwin sets, therefore, a clear-cut division and separation that put black men on the top of the ladder as he downsizes black women. As evidence, his female characters are denied any psychological growth and subjected to sex-determined roles and restrictive oppressions imposed on by society. Women's second-class citizenship and *otherness* status prevent them from achieving wholeness and growing as full characters in male novels. For the same reason, Harris Trudier recalls that "*they are taught to be other-centered, to be preoccupied with the things that form a part of their lives beyond themselves and too little occupied with their hopes, dreams, and aspirations*" (1985: 12).

Therefore, the acceptance of females' equality and equal opportunity, and equity with males seems to be both a threat and hindrance to America's patriarchal, racial, and societal orders that value men more over women, in general, and white men and women over black men and women, in particular. As evidence, "*yet, for all this growth and progression, for all this freedom of action and movement, the women are still confined to niches carved out for them by men whose egos are too fragile to grant their equality*" (1985:11).

Many black American novelists seem to have reproduced in their literary narratives Ernest Hemingway's portrayal of masculinity, which is also just another way of making black women inexistent and invisible in America in the eye of the white folk. This has even compelled critics to spend countless hours studying his writings in order to understand and gain insight into his world of manly delights, including his view on sex, war, and sport. Hemingway seems to have depicted, in all his works of art, a woman-free world as seen through his characters, themes and even his writing style that gives more room to men than women, if not only. The case in point is his novel entitled *The Old Man and The Sea* (1952) which reveals how much the author feels about men and masculinity, and the role they should play in society. Most of his characters can be split into two groups, one of which is the 'Code of Hero,' referring to the tough, macho guy who chooses to live his life by following a code of honor, courage, chivalry, honesty, and the ability to bear pain with resistance and dignity, and does not whine when defeated.

Hemingway's heroes are not squealers or cowards. Far from compromising themselves, when they confront defeat, they realize that the stance they take, the stoic endurance, the stiff upper lip are translated into a kind of victory. If they are to be defeated, they are defeated upon their own terms. Some of them have even courted their defeat and have certainly maintained, even in the practical defeat, an ideal of themselves, some definitions of how a man, not a woman, should behave, formulated or unformulated. This hero, not heroine, represents Hemingway's ideal man and masculinity, which every man should want to become and bear as proved by the old man's battle with the shark in his novel. The old man who has been defeated by the shark has turned out to be a hero as he has met Hemingway's 'Code of Hero' that is based on endurance, dignity, courage, resistance, pride, and on never-give-up philosophy. In a perfectly crafted story, he writes about a unique and timeless vision of the beauty and grief of man's challenge to the elements in which he lives.

However, not all American male writers give a demeaning status to women. Considering the prevailing situation in the south, Ernest James Gaines presents in *A Lesson Before Dying* (1971) a small Cajun community in the late 1940s with his protagonist, Jefferson, a young black man, who, in an unwittingly party to a liquor store shootout in which three men have been killed and he, as the only survivor, is convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Grant Wiggins, who has left his hometown for the university, has returned to the plantation, Baton Rouge, to teach in the community's school. As he faces the struggle whether to stay or leave for another state, his aunt, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother, talk him into visiting Jefferson in his cell and imparting his learning and pride to him before he dies like a 'hog.' Gaines' depiction of Miss Emma is very courageous and striking at a time when women are not given much room in male writing. Contrary to some American male writers like Hemingway, Baldwin, Wright, Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, among others, Gaines gives women the opportunity to find creative ways of transcending and transforming the often-harrowing circumstances that constrict their daily lives as they strive for much more freedom, respectability, and responsibility.

Faced with a 'dehumanizing' context, Miss Emma decides to reverse the trend by giving a new picture of the Black people in general. Though encumbered by a cultural tradition of 'inferiority' and the social condition of second-class citizenship assigned to her folk, she shows courage, abnegation, and all her strength of character as a woman, to restore Jefferson's identity, dignity and humanity

before the members of the jury that have called him a ‘hog’ on the day of his trial. Gaines also chants women in the way he has depicted Vivian, Grant’s girlfriend, as the embodiment of Southern American woman, the embodiments of beauty, femininity, and youth. He portrays both Miss Emma and Tante Lou as female characters that embody non-verbal culture in southern Louisiana, landmarks, living testimony seekers, tired-of-listening old ladies, whose ability to maneuver, roles as authority, committed and reliably-supportive matriarch figures have played an important role in uplifting Jefferson’s soul in the eyes of the White folk symbolically represented by Paul. Miss Emma proudly says:

I’m not begging for his life no more, that’s over. I just want to see him die like a man. This family owes me that much, Mr. Pichot and I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time for I close my eyes. Somebody got do something for me one time’ fore I close my eyes. Mr. Pichot please, Sir (Gaines 1971: 23).

Unlike his male counterparts like William Faulkner, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and even his very predecessors Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James, Emily Dickinson, and many others, Gaines gives a voice to and uplifts the longtime-unvoiced female characters. He gives them the opportunity to transcend societal stereotypes and boundaries that prevail in American society. Many male novels that provide examples of self-aware and independent female characters that fail or succeed when faced with actions of others, narrow societal roles, limitation by circumstances as poverty, health, ignorance, or lack of energy. Black women’s reality in American mainstream society has been that of hardships informed by racism, segregation and discrimination, and stereotypes that give more powers to men, prompting American male writers to follow the same trends by depicting female characters who have to confront a status of second-class citizens.

4. CONCLUSION

Concerned with looking at how the black female *persona* has been constructed in African-American literary texts, through a panoramic survey, the article has unearthed the historical experiences that are informative of black women’s daily interactions and interrelations in American mainstream society. Using historicity, it has analyzed Black women’s realities in American mainstream society that have been those of hardships informed by racism, segregation and discrimination. It has also delved into the gender stereotypes that give more powers to men, prompting American male writers to follow the same trends by depicting female characters who have to confront a status of second-class citizens.

Leaning on black feminism and *queer* theories, it has then explored the historical actuality, authenticity, and factuality that inform the ‘a priori’ male-hegemony approach in American authors’ construction of their fictional female characters. As a consequence, how the black female’ realities in a white racist, white and male-dominated society has been reproduced in literature; and how her values and contributions are weighed up in society based on how well she performs her patriarchal roles of motherhood, maternity, and wifehood, has also been emphasized. The analysis has explored some African-American male writers’ literary narratives that have turned into bringing at the surface sexual differences between black men and black women, and black men and white women. Though they were designed to produce liberatory literary texts that speaks out against the White folk’s institutionalized-debasing and *apartheidizing* political system, the work has look at, how in that process, male authors have developed a major paradigm which sets the tone in the writings of widely read authors like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and Ralph Ellison, among others.

Nonetheless, the study has also shown that not all American writers have constructed the black female *persona* in a very demeaning way. Male writers like Ernest James Gaines have provided them with the opportunity to transcend societal stereotypes and boundaries that prevail in American society. In so doing, in their literary texts, they have featured examples of self-aware and independent female characters that succeed despite narrow societal roles, limitation by circumstances such as race, poverty, health, ignorance, or lack of energy.

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