

Thematic Aspect in the Novels of African-American Women Writers: Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker

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Abstract:

The black women novelists writing is related to different influences like racism, sexism, classism which made effect on the development of love, power, creativity, male-female relationship in the black family and community. They focus on the neglected aspects of the black female life. The experiences and characteristics of the stereotypic white women are different from black women. There is the influence of male as well as female literary fore parents on the black female writers but instead of it they try to create a separate black female literary tradition. The black women writers like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, etc. show the realistic images of black women.

Key Terms:

Racism- Racism refers to the theory that inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color determines person's intellectual, psychological, or behavioral traits.

Sexism- Different treatment or discrimination based on a difference of sex or gender.

Womanism- An extension to feminism that covers the respect for women of all races and classes.

The works of black women writers, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are based on the three interdependent major themes: racism, sexism and classism. These women writer depict the prophetic vision of new womanhood. They formed a new theory of feminism. The black women novelists focus the women characters as individuals with their strength and weaknesses, their experiences as a black woman and their fight against the unjust circumstances. They redefine the black woman and they have shown the realistic images of black women in the black community.

The black male writers have portrayed male protagonist minutely with complexity and variety but black female characters are not portrayed true to their life and with actual reality by them. The depiction of women in the novels of the 20th century has depended upon who has been writing about them. Richard Wright portrayed the black women as nagging bitches, whores and mute creatures. Ellison places them almost on the pedestal of dignity. Baldwin seems to portray different categories of black women but they are treated to a common ground by virtue of the role they are given to play. They all are serving women as daughters, mothers,

wives, sisters, lovers and caretakers. They remain tied up to meant triumphs, aspirations and ambitions. They seem to live for others.

20th century black women writers have no major contribution to the history of black literature. But they continued to write from the 1970's. African American women writers started contributing themselves to the novels, short stories, and autobiographies. Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" (1970), Maya Angelo's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1900), Alice Walker's "Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman" (1979), Paule Marshall's "Brown Girl Brown Stone" (1959), Zora Neale Hudson's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937), etc. focused the intensity of women's selfhood and viewed the women characters with the women's point of view. They revolt against the traditional attitude towards black women. The changing social economic scenario, rise of Black Nationalism and feminist movements made them aware of the patriarchy.

Black women writers highlighted the motive of interlocking racist, sexist and classist oppression, black female protagonist's spiritual journey from oppression and suffocation to the realization of own identity and the place of black women in the family and Society.

The black women novelists depicted the development of black women from stereotypes to characters, from dependency to empowerment and emancipation. They tried to reflect the black womanhood and the 'self' of black women. They focused on the things which womanhood demands.

Paule Marshall (b. 1929):

Paule Marshall was born in 1929, as Paule Birke in Brooklyn, New York. She graduated from Brooklyn College (1953), conducted graduate studies at Hunter College (1955). She wrote poetry, short stories, articles and also novels. She is best known for her novels and short stories. Her collections are: *Brown Girl Brown stones* (1959); *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961); *The Chosen Place; The Timeless People* (1969); *Praise Song for the Window* (1983); *Rana and other Short Stories* (1993); *Daughters* (1991); *The Fisher King: A Noel* (2001); *Triangular Road* (2009).

She has portrayed a variety of characters who are affected by culture and society. Barbara Christian Comments: "Character and culture are so interrelated in Marshall that her literary work approaches that of sculpture, as space and form, lines of collective history continually intersecting"(104)

Her novel *Brown Girl Brown Stones* is a noteworthy contribution to African-American fiction. It depicts the development of an intelligent and complex African-American woman and her search for identity. Her *Soul, Clap, Hands and Sing* is a collection of four novellas called 'Barbados, British Ghana, Brooklyn and Brazil'. The major theme of these novellas is based on the eternal intrinsic quality of spiritual values in oppose to material values. Her novel, *Praise Song for the Window* is based on the life of a middle class, middle aged black woman. *Daughters* her next novel is a story of an African-American female executive.

Marshall wrote five novels, two collections of short stories, two essays and a memoir. As a committed writer she presents primarily black woman's quest for her own identity in a black community. Her writing is deep and comprises a wide set of themes. She portrayed the themes like colonialism, slavery and racism from a black feminist point of view. Dorothy L. Denniston says:

Marshall offers no easy solutions in her fiction but she does suggest models for change and possibility. Because she develops those possibilities through the characterization of black woman, she celebrates female agency and empowerment. Indeed, black women became representative of the larger black struggle for individual autonomy and communal wholeness. (3)

Her women characters represent strength and courage. They have a voice of their own which speaks for themselves. Marshall got many awards and fellowships. She was honoree of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation in 1990. She was awarded the prestigious Mac Arthur Prize Fellowship for lifetime achievement in 1992. She also received an honorary LHD from Bales college, Dos Passos Prize for literature. Harihar Kulkarni comments:

Paule Marshall reconstructed black womanhood and introduced a new iconography in African-American literature. She defined black female characters in relation to the community they lived in. Insisting on the relationship of common as self and as part of a community, she "prefigured the major themes of black women's fiction in the 1970s: the black woman's potential as a full person and necessarily a major actor on the social, cultural and political issues of our time (208-209).

Paul Marshall's writing depicts the black women as having their own identities; it showcases their experiences as a woman and not only as someone's mother, daughter, sister, lover or any other relation.

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931. Like Toni Cade Bambara, Chloe Anthony Wofford the original name was changed into Toni Morrison. Her awareness of the black community mostly comes from the flock tales told by her father.

She received a B.A. in English from Howard in 1953. Then she obtained an M. A. degree in English from Cornwell University in 1955 to 1957. She became an English instructor at Texas. She returned back to Howard to teach English. She contributed in bringing black literature into the main stream. She edited books by authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Devis and Gayl Jones. She published novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970); *Sula*

(1974); *Songs of Solomon* (1977); *Tar Baby* (1981); *Beloved* (1987); *Jazz* (1992); *Paradise* (1997); *Love* (2003); *A Mercy* (2008). Her nonfiction works are as follows: *The Black Book* (1974); *Playing in the Park: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992); *Race-ing Justice; En-gendering power: Essays on Anita Hill; Clarence, Thomas, and the construction of Social Reality*(editor) (1992); *Birth of a Nationhood Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case* (co-editor) (1997); *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (April 2004); *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, edited by Carolyn C. Denard (April 2008). She collaborated with Slade Morrison in writing children’s literature: *The Big Box* (2002); *The Book of Mean People* (2002)

She also wrote a short fiction *A Racitativ* (1983) and a play *Dreaming Eminent* (1986). She has made a noteworthy contribution to the American literature. She has written nine novels. Most of her novels are related to history and mythology. Her novels have a realistic touch.

Her first novel *Bluest Eye* was chosen as a selection for Oprah's *Book Club*. The novel deals with the strong desire of a black girl for blue eyes as blue eyes are the symbol of beauty. It focuses the standardized western ideas of physical beauty and romantic love and the effect of it on the black community. It also brings further psychic dilemmas, oppression and tribulations of the black girl, who thinks that blue eyes, the symbol of white beauty would make her beautiful. But the reality is different. As a result, she descends into madness. She becomes the victim of humiliation as her own father rapes her. Her second novel *Sula* focuses the effect of racism and sexism upon the identity formation of the black female. It deals with the feelings of women and the roles they are given to play whether by choice or by force. It is also related to Sula’s search for her identity with the culture of the black community.

Her third novel *Songs of Solomon* depicts the themes of loss of identity, insecurity, the oppression comes out of the rootlessness of the people themselves. Her novel *Tar baby* is based on a folk tale which is related to the continuing dilemma of African-American people, racism and sexism. It focuses the relationship between class, race and sex.

Her novel *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It is related to the different kinds of love. *Jazz* is her latest novel. It depicts the experiences of the black community in the city of New York during 1920s, a decade itself known as the Jazz Age.

Her novel *Paradise* is about the relationship between two communities. The town of Ruby, Oklahoma and a group of women who live in convent located on the outskirts of Ruby. *Love* is her eighth novel. It deals with the story of Bill Casey, a charismatic hotel owner and about the people around him who are affected by him even after his death. *A Mercy* is her ninth novel. It depicts the actual reality of slavery in early America. It is the story of mothers, daughters and also the story of primitive America.

Her characters are flexible and adaptable to new environments. She tries to find out roots of racism and the men-women relationship in early America. Her novels depict the strong effect of her culture in her writing. She tries to define blackness. She also focuses on the historical conditions of oppression of African people in America. She was honored with various prizes and awards.

Alice Malsenier Walker (b. February 9, 1944):

A popular African-American novelist, poet and essayist Alice Malsenier Walker was born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, to sharecropping parents. She became active in the Civil Rights Movement after attending Spelman College in Atlanta and Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She was influenced by Russian, Greek, African, Asian, and American black and white writers such as a Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, Emily Dickinson, Robert Graves, E.E Cummings, William Carlos Cummings and Flannery O Lonner. She published two collections of poetry- *Once: Poems* (1968); *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973). Her two short story collections are: *In love and Trouble Stories of Black Women* (1972); *You Cannot Keep a GoodWoman Down* (1981).

Her first novel, *The Third Life of Grunge Copeland* (1970) explores the story of three generations of black tenant farmers from 1900 to the 1960s. Her other novel *The Color Purple* (1982) is the epistolary novel. It won the Pulitzer Prize. It is the story of a black woman Celie who has been

raped by the man that she believed to be her father. She begets his children and afterwards is made to marry an older man. The story reveals through the Celie's letters to God and her sister Nettie who has gone to Africa as a missionary and of Nettie's letters to Celie.

She has also published a biography for children *Langston Hughes, American poet* (1974). Her novel *Meridian* (1977) focuses on the lives of the civil rights workers in South during the 1960s. Her other publications are collections of poetry; *Good Night, Willie Lee, It See You In the Morning* (1979) and *Horses Make a Landscape Look more Beautiful: Poem* (1984); a volume of essays; *In Search of My Mother's Garden; Womanist Prose'* (1983) and her collection of short stories; *The Complete Stories* (1994).

Walker Published five volumes of poetry; two collections of short stories, two essays and six novels which center around radical black womanism. Christian comments on her as "Alice walker is a poet, short story writer and essayist, as well as a novelist. Because her works in these different genres complement each other and contain many of the same thematic and structural elements, they can be discussed as a whole"(234-235).

Her novel *The Color Purple* portrays the story of a young black woman fighting her way through the racist white culture and patriarchal black culture. It shows her courage and strength to deal with the inhuman, cruel and immoral circumstances.

Her fourth novel *The Temple of My Familiar* depicts primeval world of the matriarchs in which women were independent, free and emancipated. Her fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is related to the horrors of mutilation and invigorate the movement to ban it worldwide. Her another novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile* depicts a Christian missionary family. It is related to the relationship between the father and the three daughters and also the relationship between Christianity and the spiritual tradition of the African community in which the family lives. Alice Walker throws light on the evils of the black community through her writing. W. Lawrence Hogue Says:

Alice Walker produces, Afro-American historical past- and especially about black women-to counter past and existing myths which have not

portrayed women and particularly black women as complex human beings who have existed in oppressive and sexist historical constellations (33).

She created number of black women characters. She has been a womanist. According to her "Womanism" appreciates and prefers 'Women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... and women's strength" (XI).

The contribution of these three African-American women writers toward the black novels is noteworthy. Their characters portray strength, courage and ability to deal with the evil circumstances and to defy all odds. These writers have given a unique identity of their own to these black women characters and it is conserved throughout the novels. They created vision of the new world through the eyes of the black female characters.

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