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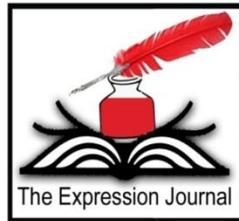
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DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK WOMEN WRITINGS: A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Literature largely reflects the picture of the times in which it is written. It also portrays the social trends and situation of various social groups. The marginal representation of black women in the writings of white as well as black writers shows her in poor light. She could not find any mention of her contribution to the struggle against slavery and for the betterment of family and society. Her near absence compelled her to think about erasing her negative images etched in the memory of various social groups. The consciousness that no one was telling her story made her. In her writings, black women bring themselves at the centre. She presents her perspectives on race, class and gender. Initially starting from putting her efforts in the direction of correcting her image in order to gain acceptability, she has moved to presenting her own observations and perspectives on race, class and gender, thereby developing as an entity in her own right rather than being appropriated by others.

Keywords

Black Women Writings; Negative Images; Race; Class; Gender; Refutation; Self-Consciousness.

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“If there is a book you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

– Toni Morrison

In order to understand the writings of black women, it is imperative to understand the complex history of blacks in general and women in particular from the times of slavery. During slavery the status of blacks as a group was nothing more than subhuman. Women were further degraded because of gender. On the plantations, they were supposed to work like men but were subjected to physical exploitation by their white masters. They were branded as mammy, mule and concubine. Even after abolition of slavery after civil war, the exodus towards the North did not bring any bright future for them. They could not claim any respectable position in the North and were oppressed because of race, class and gender. Only the basic menial jobs were available for them for survival. Because of this peculiar appropriation of black women by other social groups, it was difficult for her to erase the decades old image of themselves. Equally difficult was to place herself in a dignified position in society. She did not fall in the established societal notions about woman because she was not delicate, was not protected by others as per the social traditions. It forced her to question the very notions of ‘woman’ as was done by Sojourner Truth. Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave, from her speech at women’s convention in Ohio in 1851, who asked, “Ain’t I a woman?” (7). She challenged the very standards of womanhood set by the society. Her portrayal in the white as well as black male writers reflects the images of her as perceived by society. These writings do not indicate any efforts to change those images thinking about black women’s perspective. She was on the margins in their writings portrayed as a loving and sacrificing mammy or playing the role of assisting black males in the true tradition of patriarchy. Barbara Smith has pointed out that “in Richard Wright’s major works such as *Native Son* and *Outsider* black women are seldom seen except in the role of a slightly outlined mama or a victim” (p.15). We hardly find any mention of their role in the struggle against slavery and to eradicate the negative images of their community. Justice was not done to the complexities and pressures of her existence in their writings. But black women did not accept it as such and made an effort to bring in their perspective through their writings. Black women have expressed her resistance to the established

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conceptions about themselves through their writings in different genres such as autobiography, essays, poetry and novels. This paper is an attempt to understand the trajectory of black women fiction over the time.

For them it was not an easy task to initiate and carry on. We see that the oral tradition of story-telling about the stories of bravery of black women was as important as the writing. The denial of basic human dignity and oppression could not dampen their spirits to survive and protect their family and community. The early autobiographical writings of black women tell the heart-touching accounts of the survival of black people amidst the most hostile and inhuman conditions and escape from these. These are the true accounts of the horrors of their lives; the accounts of their physical, mental and emotional endurance. At this point of time, the focus was on the mere survival. Harriet Jacob's *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* reveals the determination of a slave girl from the clutches of slavery. While describing the ordeal of blacks, especially women, she has rightly pointed out that, "slavery is terrible for men; it is far more terrible for women... they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." (P. 77). She was considered to be a slave despite belonging to a freed family. Over a period of time, they have gradually shifted their focus from correcting their social images to the individual entity in her own right.

Early black women writers had to write in order to refute the images of black women as breeder of slaves, mammy, mule and concubine as these images were created by plantation owners in order to retain them for their own use. They had to write in order to tell the world that black woman was much more than this. They had to present positive side of her. These early writings were about mulatto because the readers were basically white people. It was because most of the blacks, especially women, could not read or write. Even in the 1950s, books were rarity for black women as revealed by Gloria Naylor. In her essay "Love of Books" she tells how her mother wanted to educate them as she was not educated, "My mother only knew her past. And her history spoke loud and clear; if you were poor, and if you were black in Tunica county, you were not going to read She always told my sisters and me that she was not ashamed of her background-it was no sin to be poor. But the greatest sin is to keep people from learning to dream." (p. 169). The focus on the refutation of existing negative images implies that they would emphasize on the fact that black women also conform to the established gender notions for white women. So, the image of Mulatto was obvious choice. The tension in the life of black women in the late nineteenth and first half of twentieth century was quite intense because of many contradictions. The writings of Nella Larson, Francis Watkins Harper, Jessie Faucet focus on the complex condition of such women. These early writings portray middle class black American women who strive to achieve a respectable position in society but they are accepted neither by the whites nor by the blacks; whites refuse to associate with them because of their black roots and blacks do not accept them as their own because of their light skin. Harper's *Iola LeRoy* discusses how the central character is torn between the world of the whites and that of the blacks. Eugene LeRoy marries Marie after manumission. They hide the reality from Iola and her two siblings. They grow up believing that they are white. When Eugene dies due to illness, his cousin finds loopholes in Marie's marriage contract and manumission. He takes possession of their plantation and remands Marie and children back to slavery. After being freed from slavery Iola LeRoy takes up a job as a nurse. Dr Grisham wants to marry her but she refuses because he is white. Her refusal to marry a white man is symbolic of her refusal to accept the attitude of white people towards blacks. She marries Dr Frank Latimer, a black man who is light enough to pass for white. Initially, she is not sensitive to

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the vulnerability of slaves on the plantations. But when she learns that she also has a partial black history, her perception changes. The question raised is whether the racial identities should be hidden under the light skin or accept their history as it is. Harper; by endowing LeRoy with attributes which white people think belong only to them, namely beauty, intelligence, virtues; expects she deserves respect and honour just like white women. The story is woven around the racial identities and a plea to be treated at par with the white dominating race. So, understandably, Harper was basically addressing the white countrymen and the racial discrimination.

In the first half of the 20th century, along with the refutation of negative images of themselves, there is an attempt to bring into focus the black culture and art, an attempt to improve their status in the society as a whole. Jessie Facet, Nella Larson, Ann Petry are some of the popular writers of the time. The struggle of black women to live a dignified life and how their attempts to do so are thwarted are the central to their works. Joanna Marshall, Lutie Johnson; the central characters; are placed in different situations by their creators in their novels. They not only become victims of racial discrimination, but also suffer on account of gender discrimination. Joanna Marshall is a stage singer-dancer. She is confident, self-assured person with no desire to conform to the conventional images of women, rather rejects these, "I am not sure how I can't be like those wonderful women. Harriet (Tubman) and Sojourner (Truth), but I won't be ordinary." (P. 14). Her allusions to these women who fought against slavery, Facet imagines the possibilities for black women to be accepted by the society in their entirety. Lutie Johnson works as a domestic help and aspires to be a singer. She dreams of giving a decent life to her little son. Through these characters the black women writers argue that though both of them try to remove the established negative images of black women by trying to move with times. They aspire for social advancement. But in both the situations, they suffer on account of hostile environment against them in the society. However, Zora Neale Hurston presents another perspective in her novel; that the black woman is neither after 'passing' nor shying away from her identity as a black. Giving more perspectives to the black women writings, Hurston brings out the problem of patriarchal hegemony and identity crisis for black women. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* portrays a mulatto, Janie, rejects the value system imposed upon them by others. Her husband, Logan Killicks treats her as her property and cuts her from the community because of his status as a mayor the all-black town though community connection was one of the strong tools to fight against slavery and oppression. The novel deviates from the earlier trends in the sense that instead of highlighting the outer environment only, the writer gives the reader glimpses of the thoughts of the central character and not only her struggle against oppressive forces.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, we find a perceptible shift in the themes of black women writings. The light is on portraying what the early black women could not; the complex existence of ordinary black woman rather than the assumed negative stereotypes in the society. Common black woman's perspective as an individual, mother, daughter in relation to her family, community and society at larger level are the thematic concerns in these writings. The dilemma faced by a common black woman in and outside black community is central. With the writings of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, self-realization and the idea of defining her 'self' is conceptualized. There is a stress on the necessity of black people to rediscover their culture and tradition and their unity in their blackness. Further, patriarchal hegemony within the black community has been problematized and presented as a threat to the survival and empowerment

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of black women. Though there is an emphasis on the role of community and culture as pre-requisite for self-understanding, there is also the need to question gender discrimination. With the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* black women's stance toward their community had begun to change. While the earlier writings reveal that trying to fit into the white American appropriate images do not do any good to them; the oppressive behaviour of their own community towards black women was equally damaging for them. Morrison's central character in the mentioned novel portrays an attempt at self-definition and brings out the need for black community to embrace their own culture and beliefs. Community's negative approach towards its own people brings disaster for them as happens in the case of Claudia McTeer. In their efforts to register their protests through these writings, black woman does not suggest to isolate herself from her community. Rather, family bonding and community are the context within which she searches for self-definition. Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others but is found in the context of the family and community as Paule Marshall describes it as, "the ability to recognise one's continuity with the larger community." (P.159). Perhaps that is why Walker prefers to call it 'womanism'. The term womanist according to her means "a woman who loves other women... appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength...committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." (P. 11).

These women writers' central idea revolves around discovering 'self' and celebrate themselves as they are with the help of harmonious relationship with each other and their community. It is also highlighted that non acceptance of their own cultural and traditional value brings self-destruction for all. The self-awareness among common black women further gives them scope for symbiotic relationship further with nature. Celie in *The Color Purple*, Mattie in *The Women of Brewster Place* elucidate this aspect. Celie is subjected to oppression on account of sexism and racism at various levels – physical, mental, emotional. She begins her journey from powerlessness to the state of full empowerment; from self-abnegation to self-recognition and celebration. But gradually she picks the threads of her life with the help of other female characters and takes charge of her life. She becomes an independent individual in her own right while discovering her roots and meeting the lost family members. Her assertion, "I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and I can't cook... but I'm here." (P.176). Similarly, Mattie charts out the path of her own life and helps other black women as well. It is evident that they live for themselves and not others.

Thus, we see that for black women writers, it has been a long journey from the margins to the centre. They have been projected in the negative light because of their social, political, economic marginality. The early black women writers struggled to refute the negative representations of Mammy, mule and concubine in the writings of whites; a marginal representation in the writings of black male writers. The writings take the examples of mulatto women whose life was torn between the white as well as black societal norms. She was the symbol of all such women who were not accepted by their own community because of their light skin and by white people because of their race. Even in the North, where black people moved in search of better life, a very bleak picture appeared as we read in the black women writings nineteen forties and fifties. These writings portray the struggle of black women who were working hard to improve their socio-economic status for the welfare of their children and family. But unfortunately, only menial jobs were available to them. The later black women writings brought

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into focus the self-realisation of common black woman. The portrayal of the growth of common black woman was at the centre of these writings. They argued that the empowerment of black women is integral to the empowerment of race and class. In this way she celebrated her 'self'.

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