

## African - American Women Writers: Emergence of a New Voice by [Re-] Positioning the Issues of Race and Gender

Dr. Krupa Sophia Jeyachandran

*Principal, Salem Christian College of Arts and Science, Salem, Tamilnadu, India*  
E-mail Address: [sophiadorothy2610@gmail.com](mailto:sophiadorothy2610@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

The African American women writers probe individualism and personal relationships as a means to comprehend multifaceted social concerns while writing from the perspective of being “black” and “women”. They are, thus, in the paramount position to write on racism and sexism that are institutionalized not only in society but also in one’s family and relationships. Though their writing enunciates both sorrow and anger, we also find in them a sense of sanguinity about human possibilities. The Black women writers are forerunners of transformation within their community and have luminously accomplished their mission of resolving their predicament and also to substantiate their sensibility as writers. They proficiently document the sufferings that the black woman has been subjected to over the ages. These writers leave an incredible impact on the generation they are in. They research on the consternations that impinge on womanhood and distinguish their anguish. Black women write for the cause of womanhood. This is strikingly resonated in the profound writing enterprise of Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni and Gloria Naylor.

Keywords: African – American, Women, Patriarchy, Racism, Sexism, Whites, Blacks

The twentieth century has witnessed a persistent energy in black American literary expression and the literary enterprise of many writers including Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Malcolm X has resulted in a profound impression on American life and perception. These writers have delved deep into the extent and diversity of Black male writers. The Black male writers have normally tackled the White society and have prudently exposed the disparities that surface between Blacks and Whites. But the Black woman writer has conventionally recorded about what goes on within the black community and it is the disclosure of this personal life to the public eye that has evoked many unsympathetic effects. Earlier, the popular belief was that racism was the only evil that affected the Black women. Alice Walker in her works has adroitly represented the inter-connectedness of American sexism and racism for they are both built on the concept of supremacy and astounding hierarchical variation. Black woman thus confronts a double jeopardy, an exceptional spitefulness of being at one and the same time the victims of one's race and of one's sex.

Sarcastically, for a fairly long time it was obvious that questioning the American dilemma was the privilege of the writer who was black and male. But the appearance of writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Margaret Walker and Gloria Naylor in the post-civil rights era made it quite evident that the African American woman would no longer be content to continue being edged out but she needs to object to the stereotypical postulations related to the colour question. The last four decades beheld the publication of some most fundamental works by African American women. When black women were acclaimed as creative authors, they found themselves on the boundaries of two literary traditions- the American, which was white (race); and the African-American, which was male (gender). But by the 1980s, black women writers had set up their own traditions. Now they continue to move from abyss to the limelight. Mary E Young expounds that, "Although African-American men and African-American women share a common history, the women have faced and continue to face triple oppression: of race, class and gender" (Young 47).

These writers probe individualism and personal relationships as a means to comprehend multifaceted social concerns while writing from the perspective of being “black” and “women”. They are, thus, in the paramount position to write on racism and sexism that are institutionalized not only in society but also in one’s family and relationships. Though their writing enunciates both sorrow and anger, we also find in them a sense of sanguinity about human possibilities. The Black women writers are forerunners of transformation within their community and have luminously accomplished their mission of resolving their predicament and also to substantiate their sensibility as writers. They proficiently document the sufferings that the black woman has been subjected to over the ages. These writers leave an incredible impact on the generation they are in. They research on the consternations that impinge on womanhood and distinguish their anguish. Black women write for the cause of womanhood. This is strikingly resonated in the profound writing enterprise of Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni and Gloria Naylor. The recurrent motif in Walker’s work is her persistence in probing the relationship between resistance and change. Evans states,

Few contemporary American writers have examined so many facets of sex and race, love and societal changes, as has Walker without abandoning the personal grace that distinguishes her voice...These elements- the focus on the struggle on Black people, especially Black women, to claim their own lives, and the contention that this struggle emanates from a deepening of self-knowledge and love are characteristics of Walker’s work. (Evans 458)

What is interesting to know about these authors is that they toss fresh light on Black man-woman relationships in the context of White American society. Eventually they provide us an indispensable understanding of their inter-personal relationships. The characters in the fiction of these writers make an effort to circumscribe to a meaningful identity, maintain their self-dignity in a world dominated by hatred and enmity and aim to value their self-worth in the menacing American society which denies them the prospects of a respectable human life. Their fiction authenticates their undeniable exploration for love and identity as well as their need for ingenious

expression and liberty to emphasize their femininity in the core and periphery of their marital lives.

Historically, quite an inadequate amount of concern has been directed towards women. In fact, the founders of Black American literature in a formal sense were women such as Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry and Harriet E. Wilson. Women have been victims not only to racial inequality but also sexual disdain. A white male or a female writer would not have been as successful and concerned to detect the desolation of the black woman. The onus, thus, was upon the black female writers to comprehend the issues of race and gender, thereby aiding literature and make a quantum leap toward maturity and honesty. Their involvement in the national arena elicited huge response from black women. As a matter of fact, the Afro-American women remained a ubiquitous absence until she was liberated by the literary activity of her Black sisters in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The bevy of the black women writers of the 1970s is spearheaded by Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker and Gloria Naylor, to name a few. Major characters in the works of these novelists engage themselves in a struggle against racism that is located in and sometimes hidden beneath the layers of a manipulative network of family and community. The Black woman, thus, encounters a double jeopardy, a awful cruelty of being at one and the same time victim of one's race and of one's sex. Maya Angelou says in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (Angelou 3).

To be a black and a woman is to endure the twofold disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender bias. In order to identify with the American black woman writers, one has to delve deep into the multifarious heritage and the extraordinary socio-cultural history of these writers. In the archives of human history, perhaps no other group of humanity has ever suffered from such a socio-economic, physical, cultural and sexual torment and anguish as the Afro-American women. Being black, these women suffered from racism; being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks. Being former

slaves, the white establishments forced them to live on meagre resources and were compelled to remain poor. The Black woman was subject to the worst kinds of exploitation and oppression. It is about this common cause that the Black American women writers write. They argue that the very basic right i.e. the right to equality was not given to these women. They were enslaved by the White master and mistress. As Maryemma Graham writes in the introduction of *The African American Novel*, “For many an African author, the act of writing is a part of a larger process of cultural revisionism, of redefining history and historical memory and of confronting the past in innovative and provocative ways that are intentionally self-reflexive” (Graham 5).

The black American women writers are largely worried about their community and the maladies it faces. They take to writing as a powerful and a reliable channel to expound an efficient outlet to their feelings. J. Brooks Bouson in his essay *‘Shame, Trauma and Morrison’s Fiction’* further elaborates on this aspect, “Dramatizing the physical and psychological abuse visited on African Americans in white America, Morrison shows that, as some trauma theorists have argued, trauma can result not only from a “single assault” or “discrete event” but also from a “constellation of life’s experiences”, a “prolonged exposure to danger”, or a continuing pattern of abuse” (Bouson 123).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* navigates the brutality that results from slavery. Morrison portrays the African American's quest for a new life simultaneously depicting the gruelling outcomes of escaping the past. The African American unquestionably wants to claim freedom and create a sense of community. In *Beloved*, interactions between within the family eventually encourage the characters to accept their painful pasts. The individual need for unity of each member of Sethe's family in *Beloved* is explained and expressed through the characters' obligation to create their personal and communal identities, but in order to frame their identities, the truth of the existence of slavery must certainly be acknowledged.

Gender roles of women are to be evaluated through the lens of female activities, experiences, goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication. Man is designated to be the master and women are never to be granted freedom. It

has been emerged from the accounts of anthropologists and sociologists that the submissive role of the female gender is either the result of biological requirement or the construct of power-relationship culturally governed by society. Every society deems culture to be superior to nature. Culture is the means by which man controls nature and women. This is the reason why gender politics against woman becomes more burdensome when patriarchy demands total obliteration and abrasion of the female self. She has no choice of voicing her opinions and feelings. Her treatment as absence rather than presence, her existence as an object rather than a subject has wrecked an incomprehensible havoc on her.

By 1983 a large number of African-American writers like Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison became apparent on the literary scene which led to a widespread publication and circulation of their works. They articulate common feelings in their works, the major ones being the particular character's effort to secure a momentous identity in a world of intensifying resistance and meaninglessness. These writers make every feasible attempt to foster the individual self-worth in an upsetting and alarming social milieu. Their themes being contemporary are pertinent in representing the status of the women folk.

Economic independence was the farthest thing these women could have envisaged. The political dimension of oppression had deprived them of the rights and privileges customarily enjoyed by the white men and women. The status of the Afro-American women was the lowest in the socio-economic as well as the political hierarchy. After white male and female came the Black male and then the Black female. While she looked after the White man's home and children, her own children were often neglected. Her family was torn apart and her children were rendered helpless owing to her lack of security and affection. The patriarchal set-up played a significant role in determining the lives of women. Jasbir Jain has remarked about the patriarchal hegemony that has wrecked the lives of women over the years:

Patriarchy, at the outset, stands for power and authority. The word has a number of affiliations and goes on to symbolize possession, control and

belonging. Patriarchy can stretch its meaning to relate to the nation. Moreover, women are not the only ones to be oppressed by it: all marginalized categories whether men or women get caught in its web of authority. And its arms extend to almost every field- philosophy, law, governance, society itself, and the more modestly constructed family. (Jain 13)

The Black men did not play their part in providing for the family. So the economic responsibilities had to be shouldered by the women; but at the massive cost of ignoring and avoiding their own families and children. They not only had to fend for the males economically but satisfy their egos as well. African American women were terribly marginalized and subjugated by the dominant white and male culture. Literature has played a prominent role in bringing their marginality to the centre of consciousness. Both literature and life have infallibly guided recognized the political, literary and the critical efforts undertaken by these women. By doing so, these women have capably identified, exposed and have also subverted the misrepresentations that oppressed them brutally, thereby making them invisible. They challenged the very foundations of this invisibility and pioneered their presence in every possible arena.

The need to interrogate gender stereotypes has led women writers and feminist critics to consider identity in relational terms. Toni Morrison's winning of the prestigious Nobel Prize is a significant triumph in many aspects. The fact that an African-American woman should get an esteemed international award is the high point of what started in the eighteenth century with the writings of Black literary foremothers like Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley. More recently, it is a suitable acknowledgement and a sagacious attainment of the fight back of the 1960s that we are familiar with as the Civil Rights, Black Power and Women's Liberation Movements.

The protagonists of this renaissance were Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Gloria Naylor, to name a few. Their endless capacity for hard work gave them the buoyancy to struggle against menacing

social and economic forces. Their triple oppression in terms of their being women, black and poor gave them a special consciousness so that when they wrote, writing became an act of expressing their voices. The Black women writers are deeply concerned with and committed to the African people in America. They use their literary outputs as outline for examining various solutions to the African's race, gender oppression and class exploitation, of course, in terms of fictional art.

The Africans are associated with their history and culture. The conundrum of gender oppression is quite intense and excruciating in their cases. Separated from her man, who was either sold during slavery, or who left the black woman when he went to seek jobs in the North, the black woman had to hold on to other women in the community who supported her emotionally. The African-Americans are one people bound by history and culture in general; and by race, gender and class oppression in particular. In this community, women come together, share their sorrows and in due course a powerful bonding is cultivated among them. Toni Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye* writes about this exclusive sense of attachment which was a consequence of the atrocities perpetrated by the White men and women and also the black men, "White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other" (Morrison 108).

Alice Walker has also been hailed as the champion of Afro-American women. She is widely acclaimed because of her theory of 'womanism'. It differs to some extent from feminism. In *The Color Purple*, Sofia and Celie bond quite well. What is absolutely noteworthy is the remarkable bonding between Celie and Shug Avery, Celie's husband's mistress. They remain connected throughout the novel and Shug is the chief cause responsible for Celie's metamorphosis. The most important theme of the novel is the harm meted out on the black community, both by their own series of aggression and the racially motivated abhorrence of Negroes in the South. Beleaguered by white racist violence and its inexorable threat, the rural black Southerners establish a tight-knit community; however, they hurt themselves from within by battering and belittling their women - mentally, emotionally, physically, and sexually.

Black women, such as Celie and Sofia, are beyond doubt doubly oppressed; they are prejudiced by racism, which makes them second-class citizens in the larger society, and they are subjugated by their fathers and husbands, which makes them second-class citizens in the home. In neither place can the black woman enjoy the basic human rights of self-determination, freedom from violence, or ownership of their own bodies. In the course of the novel, Celie marshals great deal of audacity and strength in order to fight against the odds mounting against her. An extraordinary makeover takes place and ultimately Celie makes her voice heard and her indomitable presence felt. Instead of being submissive in front of her callous husband, she now confronts him courageously when the former attacked her self-respect, esteem and integrity:

Every lick that you hit me you will suffer twice I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words.

Shit, he say, I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work.

The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say. (*The Color Purple* 213)

Gloria Naylor, another prominent Afro-American writer describes *The Women of Brewster Place* published in 1983 as a novel in seven stories. There are seven chapters and each chapter focuses on a different woman who experiences and endures conflicts within herself and also with the white male, white female and black male dominated community. The central characters and themes are fused into one corpus, and that the novel depicts the encounters of not one, but seven black women, who in a common and a communal situation, have distinct accounts of their resistance to racism and sexism. These seven women constitute the central characters or the protagonists of this work and their struggles comprise the theme of the novel. The setting of the novel is Brewster Place: a dead end street with four double housing units that is described by the author as "...the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the

alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality Company” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 1).

Naylor’s writing of the novel campaign for the basic necessities for women and has won great laurels in the socio-political and literary arena. This is mainly because of the fact that the sense of community and shared cooperation and attachment among women is represented intensely in the novel. All women portrayed in the novel lend a helping hand to one another in times of need. Throughout the novel, we can learn that there is hardly any feeling of hatred or animosity among them as against their “white” counterparts. Each woman cares and provides for their suffering lot and it is this solidarity, camaraderie and collaboration that construct the crux of the novel. In times of sickness and grief, despair and male aggression, poverty and crises, we can see that the women bond together and assist one another. The strength and resilience that they exude is noteworthy and deserves applause. Mutual bonding is the ultimate source of their strength and support. As we read about all the women and their plight, we find that they are nurtured and sustained prominently by the community. Their existence gains fruition when they survive within community.

Naylor uses the locality of Brewster Place to provide team spirit among the women who live there. The women all share the experience of living on the dead-end street that the rest of the world has forgotten. It is this living on a survival mode, without male support, that brings out the essence of womanhood. It is on Brewster Place that the women encounter everyday problems, joys (albeit, intermittently), and sorrows. Community influences one’s identity. The community on the Brewster Place with its black inhabitants was isolated from the main-stream American social structure. Reynolds Farley mentions, “Residential segregation of blacks from whites may also be a mixed indicator revealing progress in some locations and no change in others. There is a great deal of convincing evidence showing that blacks and whites seldom share the same urban neighbourhoods” (Farley 201).

Nineteenth century black women were more perceptive and also highly resilient of the sexist oppression than any other female group in American society has ever been.

Not only were they the female group most victimized by sexist oppression, their weakness was such that resistance on their part could hardly ever take the form of systematic and combined action. The nineteenth century women's rights movement could have provided the forum for black women to deal with their ill-treatment, but the white female racism disqualified them from complete involvement in the movement. Women's organizations and clubs in the nineteenth century were almost always racially segregated but that did not mean that black female participants were any less committed to women's rights than white participants. In this context, Karla F. C. Holloway remarks, "...black women's literature reflects its community- the cultural ways of knowing as well as ways of framing that knowledge in language" (Holloway 1).

Margaret Walker, also a very creative Afro-American author defended the cause of her women. *Jubilee*, a neo-slave narrative based on the collected memories of the author's maternal grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, was published in 1966. Many scholars recognize the work as an example of the historic presence that the author decrees as a prophet of sorts for her people. The novel has received magnificent fame, winning the Houghton Mifflin Literary Award (1968). It has also been translated into seven languages, and has never eclipsed from print and media. Walker followed *Jubilee* with *Prophets for a New Day* (1970), a poetic treatment of the historic civil rights fight of blacks in America. It also commemorates the tradition and narratives of African American folktales and expression and untold stories of their women-folk through the ages. The poems of the collection pay homage to many of Walker's contemporaries, such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, who also employed their art as weapons of liberation and tools for tolerance in the wake of humiliation from black men and white men and women. Black women discuss and provide solutions to the issues that impact them in particular and their community in general. This solution oriented approach and problem solving skills need most documentation, hence, the emergence of their voice by the champions enumerated above. In this context, Usha Puri says:

Black women writers like Morrison, Alice Walker and others are passing through a phase of great cultural crisis and portray their heroines straining against the confines of a cultural role they find too restrictive. While dramatizing this crisis in their fiction they are confident that the black woman would succeed in defining her true self. These writers do not accept the “double vision” nor do they accept marriage as an inevitable destiny of a woman. This kind of bold attempt to understand women’s world and the relationship of women to men, to society, to Black community in which sexual and marital relationship becomes symbolic of their outward expression, reflects a new vision of American literature. (Puri 29)

More than any other category of authors, black women writers have a single-minded and a dedicated vocation: to describe the double challenges of race and gender for readers across a broad-spectrum. The entire operation is critical because, even in today's nonfiction environment and also in the practical world, the full story of racism and sexism is hardly ever told. On most levels, all that is ever portrayed is an uneventful account. Racism and sexism are extremely insidious, despotic, repressive and dehumanizing. Black women authors aptly testify their struggle for emancipation. However, the assessment of black female experience of these writers is no longer solely dominated by the painful encounter with the white world because now they have become aware of themselves as human beings.

The black women writers are desirous of breaking stereotypes by representing the precise individuality and unique identity of their characters. Their literature manifests contemporary but pristine images of enlightened and liberated women which assist them in overcoming the sense of seclusion and subjugation.

These women writers are largely concerned with the portrayal of the sociological as well as psychological implications in feminine issues that surface in their novels. Their fiction is in some ways identical with the white women writers because both black and white women writers write in order to consider and to deliberate upon what life has taught them. Their literature is about self-discovery. History for them plays a vital role in shaping and defining their sensibilities. Contemporary black women

writers who have received much admiration by their commendable literary achievements proudly emphasize a [re]vision of basic attitudes towards black women. The phenomenon of the emergence of the Black women in American literature was heralded by many Afro-American women writers. These women have created a revolution although they are black and female. They have become conscious of their newly revived self, their literary powers, their ever-widening range of subjects and their need to stay in touch with themselves by writing about black women. This boom of creativity and the need of this new black self-definition on the part of the black women make us feel that black female literary tradition really exists.

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