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Black Feminism as a Literary Tradition

Abstract

The research paper posits to detail the black literary tradition. When the American art is viewed as a whole, the contribution of blacks is found in a miniature fraction, if we exclude their folk tradition of melody and dances. Merely, three generations have been passed of blacks' early years. The black literary tradition has immediately passed its immaturity. At first, the silent era subsequent to slavery has existed. Folk tales and music inform readers about these black writers and artists who have lived and died. African – American literature has propagated the fact that blacks have been repressed. They resisted against relentless repression. After reconstruction period black lips became verbal. This new black man took two to three generations to expand his inspirations and contemplations to correspond to his own sentiments. Those black male authors have no evidence to converse for blacks who took three quarters of a century (75 years) to visible them in a literary tradition.

Black women voices have been suppressed in context of black women's literature and black cultural tradition. African – American women have been excluded from western writings in historical period. Both African American men and White men have denied African – American women a platform in literary tradition. Reading text has influenced African – American women to raise voice against racism. The institutional practices of

racism by white patriarchal power structure have rebuffed to acknowledge black women historically. The racism and gender oppression practiced against black women persuaded them to write with reference to the perspectives of black women. After 1960's, the black writings flourished. In *Reading Black Reading Feminist a Critical Anthology (1990)* edited by Henry Louis Gates, states expression of Anna Julia Cooper. She lays emphasis on recognition of black women literary tradition was in need to claim authority. Since 1970, with the publication of literary artifacts of African tradition, black women have come in the vanguard of African – American literary tradition. Several Black women writers works are studied and intertwined into a literary tradition like, Anna Julia Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, Patricia Hills Collins, Bell Hooks and Angela Y. Davis. Social animosities have been made between black women and black men with black women's success of literary tradition and black men sexism towards them.

Keywords: Black cultural tradition, Literary Tradition, Memoirs and Racism.

In *Ain't I A Woman: Black Woman and Feminism (1981)*, Bell Hooks converses about Anna Julia Cooper was one of the most outstanding black women who advocated social equality for women. Publicly, she recommended in addition to black women for the contribution of their experiences on racism and sexism. Cooper wrote: "She is confronted by a women question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both" (Hooks 167). According to Bell Hooks, Anna Julia Cooper wished to update U S civic sense for the recognition of responsibility played by black women is not that of spokes person. She has advocated rights for black females. She has published *A Voice from the South* in 1892. It was first feminist dialogue of black women's rights and their instruction. In *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper avowed that black women should not assume the task of subsidence to males. She has also maintained social parity of sexes. In *A Voice from*

the South Anna Julia Cooper writes on “The Higher Education of Women”, in which she argued that women as collective groups should have the rights for higher education and liberation.

Black writer, Anna Julia Cooper believes that if society desires to steps forward, African – American females should be the major contributors towards race. Society was departing towards a new age. Black women were in quest of a new career. The old age was of bondage. The new age is of freedom. In her vision, society must get integrated with the changes. The black women could be either dominated or adjusted in society. She believed in the later idea. Anna Julia Cooper was fascinated in race uprising. She was not interested in problems related to racism. If both blacks and whites worked with co - operation, America could be the last greatest nation.

In *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers (1943)*, Barbara Christian elucidates life and works of black writer Hurston. Zora Neale Hurston (1891 - 1960) appeared in New York City when the Harlem Renaissance was just had begun. In this decade, before her arrival, blacks had migrated from rural cities to New York. Out of that immense migration emerged Harlem, a new pride for race and the emergence of black literature blossomed. Black women appeared in new apparels. Instead of being housekeepers, cooks and cotton pickers, they turned into domestics, garment factory workers, prostitutes and labors.

Another significant Black writer, Zora Neale Hurston’s works are traditional in literary writings. Richa Shrivastava enumerates in her thesis in *Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor’s Fiction* (2016) that, “She embraces African – American culture, black folk and their expression. In her novels, she depicts intricacy of character into an amazing tale. She is at first a story teller who is succeeded in liberating culture of her folk. Her heroines are not women of cities. They emerged in myths of South which is base of her race” (*Feminist*

Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction – 13). Black culture of South has reached its pinnacle in the course of which transformation is being brought in North of America. Zora Neale Hurston depicted wonderful richness and beauty of black folk culture. Zora Neale Hurston in her life and in her works portrayed image of black beyond typecasts. She grafted the image of black women in 19th century model created a different image for them in 20th century model.

Adam David Miller (1922 -) is an African – American novelist. Alike Naylor, he interpreted in his thesis that numerous black male writers have given an image of black women in their texts and they have called the black women obscene. The essay, “Images of black women in African – American Literature: From Stereotypes to Character” (1975) in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* written by Barbara Christian, he specified in his thesis that blacks are inquisitive to information about their black brothers and sisters. This essay was written by David Miller who described about black literature which is published in *Black Feminist Criticism* and the editor is Barbara Christian. This essay does not enquire about historical facts, he has written about African – American women culture; this book contains an important account on Alice Walker. He has printed in his thesis an important account of African – American Literature. This book has been published in 1975 with new vision. In black literary tradition, unto 1940's, the black women in the Anglo and “Afro – American Literature have been assigned stereotypes roles” (*BFC* – 1). In context with black women; they were depicted in conflict with black men. Their illustration in difference with black men could have never been established by White or Puritan society. White literature portrays White women in tune with White men.

Black women are differently portrayed in the restoration of work by Dr. Maya Angelou (1928 – 2014). She is a poet, novelist concerned as civil rights activist. She revived in her autobiography, “*I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)”, the mistreatment and racial discrimination against black women; she measures the black folks and their ethnicity.

Through her work, in this framework, considerably Maya Angelou's autobiography is her testimonial. In *New York magazine special issue James Atlas* (1996), diverts the attention about how much a writer is significant about her age:

Writer Maya Angelou talks about succeeding rise of literary memoir and autobiography to, "culture of confession" which is a robust as cultural remedy. Gayatri Spivak affix's, is also linked with "culture of testimony" wherein the subaltern gives witness to oppression to a less oppressed others (7). Theoretical connotations of autobiographies are also significant. An autobiography is judged within a fragment of a theory. (Quoted Abshavi, Mojgan and Ghosh, Nibir K. Editor, "Daring to Hope: Maya Angelou's writing the Self". Re – markings. 5.2 (sept.2006): 83 – 85. Print.

Her writings are the version of her personality. In the course of, her framework, she signified how much, she was in shock to script her memoirs.

Richa Shrivastava states about Toni Morrison in her thesis:

Toni Morrison is born on Feb 18, 1931 aged 81. Toni Morrison has written about the African – American literary tradition fabricating works on the experiences of blacks in America. She has published nine novels, two books for children, two plays and one volume of short stories. In 1977, she has been awarded for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Beauty finds its representation in Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Its emphasis is on western beauty and it comes to self destruction when people of color especially women of color. 'Sula' again sees dark color as ugly which helps her in maintaining unusual relationships. In *Beloved* (1987), instead of celebrating the birth of Beloved rather it leads her mother to an act of infanticide and violence because of her lack of beauty.

Toni Morrison explores the strongest human beings experience. Her stories in novel *Love* examine the integration of common black people. From beginning to aftermath his

novel gives experimental and spatial expressions to blacks from slavery to the freedom movements of the blacks. It is love which could bring change in the entire future of humanity and integration in America. Humanness is as important as blackness. (Shrivastava, Richa – 15)

Furthermore Barbara Christian exalts black culture and questions Toni Morrison's stance:

In his novels Toni Morrison asks whether there is black culture that functions in today's present western community. Is color a camouflage? Is race in America operating as a communal bond? Is it a past history for contemporary black people matter of color? (*Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* 69).

Alice Walker (1944 -) is well distinguished as African – American feminist or feminist of colour; she has fixed her awareness on woman. A womanist fights black woman's conflict for economic, social and political rights. Walker does not disintegrate the terms, 'womanist' and 'feminist', even if the womanist is a terminology used in feminist movement. Woman of colour struggled in 1980's, 1990's and their immense effort passed on in twentieth century. Black creative writings particularly discuss womanism. The theory is propounded by Alice Walker against racial, sexual and class oppression. It deals with black women torments in working atmosphere, biases, higher salary for males and lower salary for females. Richa Shrivastava states in her thesis, that, "African – American woman follow the maternal ancestral lineage". (*Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction* – 15) Moreover, Alice Walker explains what, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender". (*In Search of Our Mother's Garden* - xii) "The black feminist movement of today provides the outlet and audiences for African – American women to explore the unlimited arenas of criticism and theory of African – Americans". (*Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction* - 15)

Black feminist writer Gloria Jean Watkins has adopted the name Bell Hooks (1952 -), she explores the issues of race, class and gender in her work, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (1984), her work is on the black feminist movement which is significant for US society. Gender oppression is not the reason of all suppression of White women. Sexual harassment is the main cause of female domination under patriarchy. "When we talk about, "Men" in general, the word refers to "White men". When we talk about "Women", the word refers to "White women". The term "black" is synonymous with "Black Men". There is no terminology for black women. The black women were the victims of sexist – racist oppression. Patriarchy and racism discouraged black women. Racism and prejudices practised against them conditioned them to accept brutal sexual harassment with a sense of equality. Bell Hooks in *Ain't I a Woman* has commented that to uphold and maintain racism in the form of patriarchy is the fortune of black women. Educational institutes have established the seeds of racism in the minds of Whites which would keep blacks always in burden. The blacks were taught to grip to the education system which kept them in pain and anguish. The black children were taught that to embrace the system which embarrassed them.

Patricia Hill Collins (1948-) Professor Collins is a societal theorist whose research and scholarship have scrutinized issues of race, gender, social class, sexuality and nation. Her first book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* won the Jessie Bernard Award of the American Sociological Association for scholarship in gender. (Quoted: Patricia Hill Collins: Sociology .www. google. Com. 2012 Web 1st July 2012).

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the politics of Empowerment* (2000), Collins writes about black women's sexuality. As Evelyn Hammonds pointed out "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space or vision

as a void or empty space that is simultaneously, ever – visible and invisible, where black women’s bodies are already colonized” (1997, 171). In response to their portrayed image, they remained silent. The longstanding silences among African – American black women lie within black feminist thought. Black feminists think their lack of access to positions of power in U S social institutions. These institutes are schools, new media, churches and government; those repress black women’s voice. Dominant groups constructed black women as “the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white” (Hammonds 1997, 171).

“Black women’s sexualities often ignored or included in relation to African – American men’s issues. In black critical concepts where black women struggle, they get gender oppression which is accepted as important, theoretical concept of black sexuality” (Collins 1993b; 1998a 155, 155 – 83). Black women are interested in making coalition among women of different races which pre existing feminist’s frameworks. Suppression does not explain the women’s silence about sexuality. U S black women have been discouraged from speaking about such topics. Paula Gidding identifies another important factor namely, the “last taboo” of disclosing “not only a gender but a sexual discourse, unmediated by the question of racism” (Gidding 1992, 442). Within this taboo it is considerable to talk about white racist construction of black women.

Angela Y. Davis (1944 -) is well renowned for her work at worldwide level to battle all forms of repression in US and all over the world. Angela Y. Davis has written seven books as well as her autobiography, which is “convincing the capitalists to undertake industrialization of house works” (Davis 140). Accordingly, Angela Y. Davis black women repress sexual oppression. This sexual repression of black women has been publicized. Racist practices are the abuse done by White men to Black women. Men understood sexual harassment and racism natural to black women. Black women are portrayed obscene by

literary artists. “Black females are considered immoral by politicians, scholars and journalists. Even the black writer Gertrude Stein described one of her black female character as promiscuous immorality of black women” (Quoted - Stein, Gertrude, *Three Lives*. New York: Vintage Books. 1970. First Edition: 1909. 86. Print.)

Conclusion

Angela Y. Davis states struggle of African American women in *Women, Race & Class* (2011). American women accepted their struggle against female domination. They through public protests challenged the very idea of white male supremacy over African American women. The white women merged with black women on account of religious Associations, where they had large number of women organizations such as church and the National Association of colored Women. These representatives of church brought from all over United States African Women to work against oppression, struggle for liberty and elevate their human conditions.

In the nineteenth century African American women struggled with white women for rights at all levels including political, social, economic and educational rights. Woman suffrage movement gave rise to feminism. They secured married women’s property rights and right to vote. In the late 1960’s and 1970’s some African American women found themselves in suffrage movement, but it did not serve their purpose. Mostly southern white woman and some northern woman fanned a spirit of resistance to African American women. This same spirit of resistance is responsible for exclusion of African American women from active participation and decision making roles in the feminist movement. African American women of twentieth century express that the white feminist leader in their view denied the racist, sexist and class struggle.

Later on, in 1980's; under the influence of postmodern era, black women writers started writings on the issues of gender. The concept of gender recognizes the fact that there are as many as differences among woman and man as so much between women themselves. Braidotti connects gender in relation to feminist theory as, "theoretical inadequacy and its politically amorphous and unfocussed nature". (1994:36).

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