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ETHNICITY AND GENDER IN AFRO-AMERICAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity is racial and politically power sharing. Ethnicity argues political and social equality and cultural pluralism. Gender becomes feminism in the literary context and argues for equality of women. Feminism is a theoretical approach to the recognition of the values, beliefs, ideas and behavior of traditional female identity. Formal feminism is about the white women struggling for their recognition and empowerment. It is not so much social as legal. Afro-Americans have a different problem; Feminism is re-defined to become relevant to the Afro-American movement. Alice Walker called it 'womanism'. According to her, feminism and womanism are like purple and lavender. Black Feminism focuses on the problems of Black women as against the mainstream feminism that focuses on the white women. Both Maya Angelou and Zora Neale Hurston say that the Black women have as much to do intra- racially as inter- racially. A few of the novels of Tony Morrison are taken for illustration both for Ethnicity and Gender as Socio-racial features of Gender and Ethnicity.

Key words: Gender, Ethnicity, Afro-American fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Afro-American fiction is a genre' in itself and must be studied as a record of the history of the African race on the American continent. The word fiction in this context is different from that in the British or Euro-English studies. Whereas the British novel was the outcome of the Aristocratic or upper middle class ironical and cynical observations of the society, Afro-American fiction is the product of an uprooted race brought under duress and planted in the plantation as slave labour.

The Blacks suffered because of the colour which was thought of by the Whites as the colour of an inferior race. This feeling of superiority made them treat the Blacks as though they were animals. Secondly, the Whites wanted cheap and plentiful labour and therefore made the slaves for generations to work in the plantations. In addition to this ethnic inequality, they had to suffer as oppressed women. They were treated as child-bearing machines to supply generations of slaves and when they were widowed, they were made to bear children through even the White race so that there will be a continuous supply of slave labour.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

According to the confession of some of the early Afro-American women novelists there was more to this oppression as they had to face incestuous sex relations within their own black men. Whether it is Zora Neale Hurston or Toni Morrison, the black girls are raped by their own fathers, sometimes repeatedly or by the friends of their mothers. So, Ethnicity had little role in this domestic gender equation. The novels from early times have read these two aspects of Socio-cultural experience of the black women which formed the theme of the Afro-American novels. As these experiences were autobiographical and anthropological and as the effects are socio-psychological, the novels are basically autobiographical in nature with this difference that the first person narration is an abstraction of the individual into the 'I' of the social awareness. The personal experience is given as an objective observation with the aesthetic distancing scarcely concealed.

The novels are anthropological and socio-psychological. Ethnicity is about the races and feminism is about gender. Formal feminism is an expression of the attitude of the white upper class women seeking social and gender equality. Some of the novels of Afro-American writers are studied in the length of character and plot to examine the race and gender prejudice. "Feminism has traditionally been a middle-class white women's movement. Feminism fought for suffrage rights for white women. But never got involved in the civil rights movement" (Africana-Womanism). Initially, they wanted statutory and legal acknowledgement of their position and enfranchisement. It was an easily reached goal. At the second stage, feminism became a social transaction emphasizing the need for other levels of equality like equality of pay and equality of access to better conditions of living. This was achieved to a small extent. The third wave was more a reaction to the lacunae in the earlier movement. These are historically, socially and ethnically irrelevant to the Afro-American women working in the plantations of the USA. The origin, the expectations and the process were so different that feminism had to take a new meaning. It has to be black, contemporary and more basic in its demands than those of the upper middle class English women.

Alice Walker in this context, coined a new word 'womanism'. It is not diluted feminism, it is not a difference of degree but a difference of kind. Except that the subjects were women in both kinds of feminism, there is nothing else common between them. Alice Walker expresses the difference with a colourful metaphor: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker, pp.xi-xii). Womanism is a subset of mainstream feminism. The novels from the early ones to those of Toni Morrison treat these problems in great elaboration. It must be remembered that there is no fictitious invented characters or plots. They are not faceless ghosts. They are living men and women, those whom the authors had seen for themselves moved with, interacted and suffered. The point that emerges is that Black feminist theory stresses that their womanism has to do as much intra- racially as inter- racially.

Another distinguishing feature of the Afro-American novel is that of acceptability or physical conformity to European standards. Toni Morrison says "The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present, future" (Morrison, pp 89). The idea of beauty in woman is a European concept based on the features of Caucasoid physical features like fair skin, straight hair, thin lips and blue eyes. The Negro races got black skin, rough hair, thick lips and dark eyes. Black women have beauty in themselves and were attractive to their race and even to the Whites. Alice Walker explores the myths of the superiority of white skin and the white man's burden which is to raise the backward black men to equal the white standards.

Alice Walker creates a new myth. Mythopoeism is resorted to by Black women novelists from Hurston to Toni Morrison. "Mythopoeism is the conscious creation of a myth. Many myths are primitive explanations of the natural order and comic forces. Some writers felt a need to invent or contrive a mythology which shall be the vehicle of beliefs" (Cuddon, pp.562-563). According to Alice Walker, all anthropological records and paleontological research point to the origin of human race in South Africa. The region being directly in the Torrid Zone with the sun scorching it, the men were probably black. It was nature's device to protect them from the heat of the sun. By some hormonal deficiency, some were born white whom later etymology called Albinos who had skin and hair abnormally white and blue eyes. Unable to bear the heat of the sun, they

moved north to the colder regions of Europe and created a myth that white race is superior to Black race. This reminds us of the story of the Blue Jackal. Apart from the basic facts, Alice Walker's myth busts the notion of white superiority. It was an ethnic blow. This disproves the superiority of the physical features of the White over the Blacks. Hence, womanism is more authentic, relevant and rooted in facts than feminism. This is enough reason for Alice Walker to call her brand of womanism 'Black feminism' or 'Black discourse'. Theories apart, the traumatic impact of these ideas on the society and the psychology of the people is devastating at the same time, it annihilates both the racial identity and gender identity.

Toni Morrison's first novel 'The Bluest Eye' treats both ethnicity and feminism in equal proportions. It is the tale of a little girl who was treated as unfit for the society because she did not have blue eyes as the white races had. In class, she was neglected, segregated, jeered, mocked at and insulted. She began to wonder why that was her lot. She wanted to be accepted because acceptance and belonging are psychological needs of any person in a society. She came to know that the reason for her being segregated was the colour of her eyes. She did not meet the expectations of the white race. Racial segregation is the behavior and emotion that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race. "The basic myth of racism is that white skin colour brings with it superiority that White is more intelligent, more virtuous" (Clark, pp 104). Toni Morrison adroitly exploits her myth of the white race and it functions as anthropology, myth and metaphor, a course which, according to the psychologist Jung, is a route taken by anthropology to become metaphor. If the lack of blue eyes induces persecution, incest, prostitution, child molestation and domestic violence that portray womanism, racism is manifest all over. Morrison in the Afterword to *The Bluest Eye* writes that the novel came out of a childhood conversation she could never forget. She remembers a young black girl who wanted blue eyes. It was only later that the Negro movement 'Black is beautiful' infused confidence in black women about their blackness. In this novel the features of the white race are not merely a racial identity but a norm against which all other races are measured.

As the sources, techniques and goals are different from those of European novels we have to develop new critical canons to interpret them. It should not be thought that the racial and the feministic are the only interpretative approaches to the Afro-American novels. They will be studied as frontier literature born out of three kinds of differences. The first difference between two people, the whites and the blacks, the second, the difference between two civilizations or religious set-ups, the African tribal religions and Methodist Christians. The third is the frontier between two languages, British and the creolized English (Cornon, quoted in *New Casebook*, pp.11). Hence, the new canon will have to take into account these linguistic parameters. Afro-American literature can be studied as inter-racial, inter-civilization and inter-linguistic or what Homi K. Baba would call 'hybridity'. Both Edward Said and Homi K. Baba give us a theory for approaching trans-cultural literature (Dylan Thomas, pp.10-11). Such theoretical considerations are being now applied to Anglo-Welsh poets like G.M. Hopkins and Dylan Thomas. Such an approach will fix an Afro-American novel in the context of a global experience.

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2. Toni Morrison, "*Behind the Making of The Black Book*", Black World, February 1974, pg.89
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4. Kenneth Clark, *Black and White: The Ghetto Inside* (Lapides and Burrows, 1971 pg.104
5. Tony Cornan in *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff, 1997) discusses frontier literature with special reference to Anglo-Welsh poetry.

6. For a discussion of hybridity and its relevance in trans-cultural studies, see page no.10-11 of *Dylan Thomas*, Ed: John Goodby and Chris Wigginton, Palgrave, New York 2001.

Web Resource

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