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POSTCOLONIAL AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS: THEIR TRIANGULAR STRUGGLE  
AGAINST CANONIZATION, IMPERIALISM AND SEXISM

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature often focuses on race relations and the effects of racism and usually indicates white and/or colonial societies. Postcolonialism includes a vast array of writers and subjects. In fact, the very different geographical, historical, social, religious, and economic concerns of the different ex-colonies dictate a wide variety in the nature and subject of most postcolonial writings. The postcolonial woman, as revisited through female writers of color, exposes the ever present strife engendered by imperialism, canonization, and sexism. A study of this nature is important today as that now the atmosphere for writings by women is overflowing. This abundance of literature coincides with societal changes. This paper reveals the unique experiences of Afro-American women, as well as highlights the varying methods in which the works fight against the triangular establishments of imperialism, canonization, and sexism.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Imperialism, Canonization, Sexism, Women Writer.



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INTRODUCTION

Post-colonialism is a period of time following colonialism, and postcolonial literature is typically characterized by its opposition to the colonial. Postcolonial literature often targets on race relations and the outcome of racism along with generally implies white and/or colonial societies. Simon During, in his essay discussing the nature and boundaries of post-colonialism, argues for a more inclusive definition, calling it "the need, in nations, or groups which have been victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts or images." Works of literature that are defined as postcolonial often record racism or a history of genocide- including slavery, apartheid, and the mass extinction of people, such as the Aborigines in Australia. Post-colonialism includes a vast array of writers and subjects. In fact, the very different geographical, historical, social, religious, and economic concerns of the different ex-colonies dictate a wide variety in the nature and subject of most postcolonial writings. In this regard some women colonial writers sketch a relationship among post-colonialism along with feminism. For many of these writers, who live in strong patriarchal cultures, language and the ability to write and communicate represent power. In the

postcolonial period, however, language, and the ability to speak, write, and publish, is becoming a great empowering tool regarding postcolonial authors.

Female writers still point out to us all with the differences between themselves and males and the separate struggles they face. In his book *"Canonization, Colonization, Decolonization: A Comparative Study of Political and Critical Works by Minority Writers"*, Seodial Deena discusses the fate of women, a lot more adequately, women of color who "had no alternative but to discover and define themselves through their writings in order to liberate themselves" (19). Specifically, the patriarchal system which places the male in dominance over the female is a structure which often places the ethnic male in third rank; moreover, this placement positions the ethnic female at the bottom of the societal power chain. The tool of writing for women of color, previously and also currently, continues to create "a new territory for postcolonial women" (Deena 19). Within this "new territory" the postcolonial woman has the ability to assert an authority, which usually experienced in the past demonstrated themselves just into their position while as caregiver, mother, worker, or servant. The postcolonial woman, while revisited by means of female writers of color, exposes the ever present strife engendered by imperialism, canonization, and sexism.

A study of this nature is significant today as that now the atmosphere for writings by women is overflowing. This specific abundance associated with literature coincides with societal changes. The writings of Afro- American women reveal her individual struggles versus canonization, imperialism, in addition to sexism. The experiences dictated by women contrast sharply with those examined in texts written by men. The women in addition to her particular works selected for this study have all made significant contributions to the field of literature.

#### **Imperialism, Canonization, & Sexism Defined**

Beginning first along with imperialism, which is based on the fourth Edition American Heritage means: "The policy of extending a nation's authority by territorial acquisition or by the establishment of economic and political hegemony over other nations" (426). Far more properly, imperialism is usually a one on one product of Colonization. Although progress has and continues to occur, one cannot ignore the existence of imperialistic views of race and their lingering presence within a postcolonial setting. Attitudes in accordance with racial and gender inequalities stand as one of the opponents facing writers who also happen to be women of color.

Canonization alternatively offers immediately with the establishment of the traditional literary canon. There exists a continuing battle to be able to keep the established literary canon, after all, works contributed to the canon are "works...typically restricted to dead white European male authors" (Wheeler). According to the definition given on his website, Dr. L. Kip Wheeler reveals that women are not usually given entrance into the established canon; furthermore, works by ethnic minorities are not usually included either. Therefore, any literary work created by a woman of color must fall under the scrutinizing eye of protectors of the canon. Before the processes that lead to colonization around the world, and the spread of education, inclusion within the canon was not dependent upon the views of those in power alone. In their work, *"Cultural Valorization and Afro-American Literary History: Reconstructing the Canon"* Sarah Corse and Monica Griffin discuss, briefly, the old, traditional methods of canonization where upon a work "was assumed to be based solely on the literary merits and attributes of the text itself" (175). In the past, great writings poured in from the same sources: predominately white, predominately middle and upper class males. With the rise of writing by those considered inferior, standards shifted and more factors had to be considered before a work could be integrated within the canon. Women of color must, therefore, repel the threat of canonization, and the likelihood that the inclusion of their writings will cause them to fall victim to possible deconstruction by keen protectors of the traditional literary canon.

The craftiest of all opponents women writers of color will take on is sexism. Sexism is just the stress put together by ideological complexities of male dominance above their female counterparts. Within direct correlation with the traditional literary canon, the site with the female writer offers regularly already been questioned. Works by women of color are also greatly scrutinized if they have a tendency to represent men in the negative light. Hence it is logical that works written by women of color reference the female struggle versus sexism. After all, the writers themselves have lived and witnessed these experiences. To begin a

discussion of the dilemmas of Afro- American female writers it is not only easy but important to begin with the first African to have his or her works published in America: Phillis Wheatley.

### Phillis Wheatley

Wheatley, whose status is only hindered by the sheer amount of criticism, Furthermore, her life as a writer sheds light on the duality of literature by women of color. Wheatley's writing would go on to provide proof of the Afro- American's ability to handle the art of poetry.

Her writings became the method by which the masses learned to assess literature created by people of color. Consequently, this collection would also place Wheatley at odds with protectors of the canon, as well as with critics who found it absurd to think that a black could have written an accepted piece of literature; furthermore, the individual in question was a black woman. Furthermore, black women are under attack due to their placement below their black male counterparts? In his book *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, editor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reexamines the "trials" of Phillis Wheatley, discussing the "misgivings" pertaining to Wheatley's published writings. Gates reveals through his discourse of Wheatley what other women of color have to look forward to when attempting to define their existence through their writings. Women of color must face conflicts outside their race as well as conflicts spurned within. They are often "Too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth" (Gates 82). In her writings, Wheatley is dependent intensely upon her Christian faith. Her poems are filled with references which really encourage as well as those which ask her readers to question their views relative to Africans.

In the case of Wheatley, the actual assault is forcefully strong. As a slave, she was apparently unaffected by the harsh realities that many other Africans survived. Therefore, within her writing, one may aware that there is not much literature which protests slavery. It has also been deemed by a few, like Wright, as the crux upon which her work should be assessed. Even though Phillis Wheatley was the first African in America to have published writing, it would not keep others from questioning the writings of other Africans.

### Zora Neale Hurston

The writings of Zora Neale Hurston are as diverse as they are quintessential in understanding the connection in between literature composed by women of color and the world. Of her Hurston notes: "I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes... I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (*Colored* 1031). Hurston is a woman whose literary legacy is outlined by the idea that a black woman could demand a space in the world; furthermore, she feels that the woman did not have to do so in fear of her race or femininity.

In perhaps her greatest literary achievement, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of one woman's journey to find the perfect union she witnesses among objects in nature. The text begins by a revelation of the differences between male and female perception of dreams. Unlike their male counterparts whose dreams sail forever on the horizon, women fashion a different reality. The Self-Authorized Language of Difference in Zora Neale Hurston explains that Hurston's writing exhibits a unique quality that allows her to "speak from the margins" (80). Referencing the fact that as both a woman and an Afro-American, Hurston inter-plays differences to "facilitate an inspection of cultural identity" (81). Unlike the journey of the black man, Hurston is female, and thus her identity is actually two times indemnified by the problematic effects of post-colonialism. At the time of its original publication, Hurston's work became the center of an indefinite debate. On one side were supporters, even though some of which were white while on the other side were detractors, of which some were black. Like Wheatley who preceded her, Hurston found her writings combating against imperialistic ideals related to race and culture as well as with sexist views of black men.

### Alice Walker

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has been recognized as one of the greatest literary works of its time. By that same token, Walker's writing has been criticized for themes that include a negative portrayal of black men. Bell Hooks in his article "*Writing the Subject: Reading the Color Purple*" describes the work as it "broadens the scope of literary discourse, asserting its primacy in the realm of academic thought while

simultaneously stirring the reflective consciousness of a mass audience" (215). Hooks notes that a key characteristic of the work is the sexual exploration of the main character: "Celie's life is presented in reference to her sexual history" (216).

Mary Helen Washington's readings of Walker's works divulge what she defines as the construct of "the woman suspended" (41). Interestingly, "the woman suspended" is the perfect description of the experiences of women of color within a postcolonial society. The woman of this description is placed at an involuntary standstill. Her movements, or lack thereof, are dictated by society and the powers which surpass those of woman; man dictates and the woman must observe.

Walker forces the reader, male and female, to be able to reexamine the experience of the woman within a postcolonial setting; a setting wherein the men of color have found freedoms that they continue to deny their women. Walker's discourse as noted in *The Color Purple* is also realized in her text, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The key narratives presented within the work revolve around Grange Copeland. The other major narratives in the text act as subsets to those of Grange's, and are explored through the life of his son Brownfield and Grange's granddaughter, Ruth. In his article, "Speech, After Silence: Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*", Harold Hellenbrand opens discourse on Walker by noting Walker's earlier declaration of two factors acting as strains on black fiction: "the chronicle of a black family and the tale concerned primarily with racial confrontation" (113). Through a careful examination, one is able to view the lives of the Copeland's and understand the difficulties they face while fighting the rural south. The narrative articulated within the novel revolves around the male characters; however, the women referenced in the work speak volumes of the aforementioned female battle against imperialism and sexism.

Walker unveils specifically the stress regarding imperialism on black men, and its better out comes on black women. The characters Ruth, Margaret, Mem, and Josie point out a society where upon the male is the authority figure. Thus the woman exists below the white man and her fellow black man. According to Deena: "All forms of oppression-slavery, apartheid, colonization, and canonization do have adverse effects on women" (17). When the black man feels that he is powerless, he acquires some form of power any way he can. The byproduct of imperialism: colonization left in its wake the makings of embedded hatred and oppression.

The colonized woman, needless to say, has nowhere else to turn except to her man, and she returns to him even when he stifles her very existence. The writings of Alice Walker continue to provide us with the opportunity to discuss the condition of women of color, more appropriately black women. As evidenced by her writings, the experiences of the characters in her works are pinpointing of the realistic world inhabited by black women. Unfortunately, it is a world that many can only view from the outside thus; they are incompetent of fully understanding what it means for these women. / This colonized woman, needless to say, features no place different to show except to the woman's male, in addition to she dividends to them regardless if he / she stifles the woman's very existence. This writings involving Alice Master still present us all while using the probability to discuss the matter involving females involving coloring, more correctly black color females. Seeing that verified through the woman's writings, this suffering of the people with the woman's performs are generally a sign of the realistic entire world inhabited through black color females. However, it is just a entire world that many can easily solely look at from the external hence; there're incompetent at entirely realizing exactly what it indicates pertaining to these kinds of females.

### **Toni Morrison**

Morrison's essay "*Thoughts on the African-American Novel*" discusses exclusively the role of the novel within the Afro- American community. Accordingly, Morrison describes the novel as a product produced for the middleclass. As it would seem, those who were a part of the lower class or the upper class had everything they needed; however, the middle class, in the wake of the Industrial revolution needed something to help them define the new space they would inhabit in society. Morrison notes: "they [the middle class] had no art form to tell them how to behave in this new situation. So they produced an art form" (30). The shift here in writing would make up for a lack stories that had been shared through music, or oral traditions among the lower classes.

The novel became a success because of its ability to not only teach proper protocols to a escalating society, it was also able to convey new experiences "In the same way that a musician's music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience...it's of some importance to me to try to make that connection" (Morrison *Novel* 31). For many, Toni Morrison is known as the Afro- American laureate who transposed the precisely framed story of the slave Sethe in her Pulitzer Prize winning work *Beloved*. This aspect of the "American reality" is a part of that same reality professed by other Afro- American female writers who use their writings to devise a space that has been denied to them by society. Toni Morrison's decisive work, *Beloved*, is a work that helps to connect the African, and to an extent, the American community by recounting a period of American history that has often been difficult at times to discuss. According to the power structure established by imperialism, the female slave, like her male counterpart, is a thing to be used.

Another of Morrison's works, *Song of Solomon*, reveals an effort of a young man to find his place. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a work which continues to proliferate the desire of the female to procure not only power, but a sense of place in the world. The novel's introduction includes an explanation from the narrator, Claudia, who notes: "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941... It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 5). This is important because it is the understanding of two female children who have come to terms with their existence as black girls in the world. The meaning behind their exposure essentially means they are unable to bring forth an object of beauty in a place where "the earth itself [was] unyielding" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 5). It seems that the earth and everything in it was unyielding for those like Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola. These Afro-American girls express a key point in the maturation process. At their age, they have already been exposed to the truths associated with the existence of minority females within an Imperialistic society. They are black and essentially ugly, unlike the beautiful Shirley Temple or even fair skinned Maureen. The difficulties faced by these three girls provide evidence of what life is like for black females. The narratives of Claudia, Frieda, and most importantly Pecola are formed most certainly by the Imperialistic ideals pertaining to both race and gender. This is perhaps the crux of Morrison's work with *The Bluest Eye*: an examination of the psychological destruction of the black female mind by the effects of imperialism. Black women in society are at constant war with the image that the world has cast of them. Essentially, they will either conform or pretend that it does not shape their existence.

### Conclusion

On multiple levels all women have been oppressed. The battle lines created by the threats of imperialism, canonization and sexism may have blurred yet the existent problems have yet to dissipate. Now more than ever is there a critical need to continue the discussion of the predicaments faced by black women within a world shaped by colonization. It is after all the house of imperialism that has imposed invisible walls around black women. Thus, our current society is no different as it, too, reveals the ugly existence of sexism as perpetuated by males against black females. The writings of black women continue to provide evidence of the far reaching effects of colonialism. The battle is not over. The battlefield has changed and the warriors have acquired new levels of strength, yet the battle rages on.

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