

# Multiple jeopardy in the works of African American writers and Maya Angelou

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**Abstract**— The Twentieth century has been a period of intense literary activity for African American women writers. It was a time when for the first time these talented writers started to write and express their creative genius, Maya Angelou and women writers started to express themselves truly for the first time. Their works portray their growth, struggle. African American women writers have given readers powerful insights into grim issues such as race, gender and class, but before one makes a deep inquiry into the works of these women writers, it is highly essential to know about their past.

**Keywords**— **Jeopardy, Racism, Classicism, Sexism, Pejorative.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has been an epoch making era for the African American literary tradition because of the significant contributions made by African American women writers during this century. .

African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and many others have rewritten the existing literary traditions by expressing themselves and creating a deep impact on the African American, literary arena. The works of these women writers reverberate with self-expression, thus achieving a canonical status and enriching not only African American but also the American literary world. These writers write not only about themselves, but also about African American women.

Commenting on African American women writers, Mary Helen Washington observes that black women have been very essentially alone. Her rationale is that they have very little control over their bodies. The assumption is that the morale of the black men was damaged and there by the women are bereft of their men's closeness and protection: They feel alone because there is no one to tell them the story about themselves. Mary Helen Washington is sure that black women writer are comforting. These writers know her story. She feels compelled to allow unfettered freedom to discover and interpret the complete range and variety of black women's experiences. So that preconceived notions don't thwart their attempt. Black women writers have provided enough models for promoting more choices for the possibility of living. They have shown that there is a large space for the black women.

The twentieth century has been a period of intense literary activity for African American women writers. It was a time when for the first time these talented writers started to write and express their creative genius. According to Traylor:

It explores first the interiority of an in- the- head, in the heart, in the gut region of a discovery called the self. It tests the desires, the longings, the aspirations of this discovered self with and against its possibilities for respect, growth, fulfillment, and accomplishments. (71)

These women writers started to express themselves truly and freely for the first time. Their works became their manifesto. Their works undoubtedly portray their growth, struggle and accomplishment. The twentieth century women writers have explored every possible genre of literature: fiction, nonfiction, formal, informal, poetry, stories, essays, autobiographies and others. They have chartered unknown territories and set a new unprecedented trend.

African American women writers have given readers powerful insights into grim issues such as race, gender and class, but before one makes a deep inquiry into the works of these women writers, it is highly essential to know about their past. To quote Margaret Walker:

It is necessary as always when approaching Afro-American literature in any form—poetry, prose, fiction, or drama—to give a background of the socioeconomics and political forces and the historical context before proceeding to a literary analysis or synthesis. Then we will have the necessary tools with which to examine the strange phenomena found in American and Afro-American literature. (Tate 202)

African American women writers have a unique but grim past. Their ancestors were plucked out from the continent of Africa and brought in America as slaves. African men and women were tortured, brutalized, oppressed and exploited beyond imagination. Arriving in America, these African men, women and children were systematically and legally robbed of their humanity (Baker 2). However the system of slavery proved even more brutal for African women. They were robbed of their respect, dignity and identity. They faced violence at the hands of their white masters not only in the form of hard labour and whipping lashes but also

became an unwanted victim of sexual abuse. These women were often raped by their white masters and their children sold away by them.

Harihar Kulkarni has rightly assessed that the brutal treatment of black women had deeply hurt their psyche ensuing a psychological thralldom. Everything worth living for is mutilated. It has turned them to a kind of mutated existence. The socio-economic-political powers outside had played spoil sport in their minds causing irrational fear, worry, anxieties, sense of inadequacy. They were quite frustrated with life – such slavery of the body and mind determined the structure of the slave behavior.

The American chattel slavery system had a devastating effect on a black woman's body as well as her psyche. This system worked through socialization, violence and objectification and in unified effect damaged black woman's self-identity and consciousness (Kulkarni 62). Explaining this 'objectification' of African American women, Harihar Kulkarni writes:

The peculiar institution that exploited black women for productive and reproductive ends viewed them not as human beings but as mere objects. The black woman was not a person but a thing—a thing whose personality had no claim to basic human dignity. She was a house hold drudge, a means of getting distasteful work done. She was an animated agricultural implement to augment the services of mules and plows in cultivating and harvesting cane and cotton crop. Then she was a breeding machine, a producer of human livestock, and potential laborers, who on being bred and brought up, would be lynched, flogged, branded and even murdered at the will and pleasure of the master. (57)

This objectification of African American people especially that of African American women had a devastating effect on them. It affected them at various levels: physical, mental, moral as well as intellectual. In this way the black people were negated to mere human transferable capital, and dubbed as inferior and debased. In these testing times, black women tried to keep themselves, their children and whatever they could hold on to alive. While silently suffering the horrors of slavery, African American women tried their best to maintain their self-respect and self-identity.

Right from the days of slavery to the present, African American women have been facing the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classicism. Maya Angelou vehemently talks of the the position of African American woman, —caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power! (65). These African American women face racism from whites, both men and women; gender discrimination, both by whites as well as their African American men; and classicism in the form of being economically disabled and placed on the lowest rung of society.

Gloria Wade Gayles aptly describes the precarious position of African American women: To Gloria Wade Gayles African American women are under an oppressive socio-political system. The system is divisive in its propensity. The people are divided into groups in terms of race, gender and class. In such a frame of society only a few possess capital. And only a few capitalists hold the power structure. The whites hold the reins of power. The blacks are very marginalized. Only a cramped space is available to the blacks who undergo exploitation and are powerless. Gloria Wade Gayles places the black women the most marginalized among the marginalized. Their space is a third circle within the second one. The black women are the worst sufferers in the system experiencing pain, isolation and vulnerability.

American is an oppressive system that divides people into groups on the basis of their race, sex and class, creating a society in which a few have capital and therefore are able to influence the lives of many. There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. (3-4)

It is the black women who have always been at the brink of society and at the receiving end of every kind of oppression. Investigating into the past, one can clearly observe that African American women have been inscribed into a process of oppression and exploitation resulting in a particular codification of these women. According to Patricia Collins, women's existence is structured along three interdependent dimensions which all operate through oppression—economy, polity and ideology.

Society has often used economy as a means to force black women into all-consuming activity so that they have almost no or very few opportunities to do any kind of intellectual work. Similarly through the dimension of polity, black women have often been excluded of rights and privileges which are readily available to male citizens. Finally, ideology represents the process by which black women have often been associated with certain qualities and it is used to justify the ongoing oppression (6-7).

Thus, one sees that American society has triply disempowered and disenfranchised African American women. Among these three oppressions, racism is the most powerful oppression, which African American women have been facing. It started with them being brought as slaves and continues till now. African American people have often been hated and degraded because of their black skin colour. Sidney W. Mintz writes in this context:

The word —slave still brings the visual image of blackness to North American minds. This association of forced labor and degradation with peoples of a particular physical type is a powerful symbol of the extent to which social perceptions are historically conditioned. (34)

In historical records, slavery in the United States of America ended after the Civil War with the commencement of the thirteenth Amendment. However, racism still continues in American society in one form or the other. The enslavement of African

American people into chattel slavery, the next hundred years of raping of African American women, lynching and mutilating of both black men and women, has had a deep effect on African American people. They have been living the life of —invisible.

African American women bore the brunt of racism to the extreme. They were dubbed as —niggers and —black bitches. In a racist white society, African American women became the epitome of ugliness and abhorrence, while white women were considered a symbol of purity. According to Thomas S. Szasz, —Americans have used this blackness and madness as their standards and transcendent symbols of evil, and whiteness and sanity as their standards and transcendent symbols of good(68). Being African American in descent has put these women into a more subjugated position and cast them in a more inferior position than the black men. On the basis of race and their skin color African American women have been systematically incarcerated from every positive aspect of life.

African American women's plight does not end with the oppression of racism, she faces yet another kind of brutal oppression based on gender that is, sexism. She not only leads the life of black but also a woman, and thus, she is in a double disadvantaged position of being black and a woman in a white American patriarchal society. Lorraine Bethel writes explaining the subjugated position of the African American woman owing to her colour and gender:

Black women embody by their sheer physical presence two of the most hated identities in this racist/sexist country. Whiteness and maleness in this culture have not only been seen as physical identities but codified into states of being and world views. The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms —thinking like a woman and —acting like a nigger, both based on the premise that these are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore the most pejorative concept in the white male world view would be thinking and acting like a —nigger woman. (178)

The sexism and its oppression started simultaneously with racism for black women when they were enslaved. They were made to work along with black men in plantations, but also were sexually abused by their white masters. Besides hard labour in the day, they became sex objects for white slave masters in the night. They were rampantly raped and forced to procreate a new breed of slaves which were to be sold off. Even after gaining freedom, African American women have been often raped and their modesty outraged by white men.

Maya Angelou in *I know why the caged bird sings*, speaks about the child rape and how she comes out of it. *I know why the caged Bird sings* is a 1969 autobiography describing the early of American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The first in a seven volume series, it is a coming of age story that illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. Maya Angelou transforms from a victim and racism with an inferiority complex into a self – possessed, Angelou's treatment of racism provides a thematic unity to the book. Literacy and the power of words help young cope with her bewildering world ; books become her refuge as she works through her trauma.

She says in her book “ The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice white illogical hate and Black back of power”.(65)

Equally disturbing is the sexist oppression by African American men. The assumptions of phallic superiority of African American men had a debilitating effect on African American women's psyche. These black men not only oppressed their black women, but also hankered after white beauty ideals. It is apt to quote Eldridge Cleaver, a black leader:

I love white women and hate black women. I'd jump over ten nigger bitches just to get one white woman.... A white woman is beautiful, even if she is bald-headed and only has one tooth.... There is softness about white woman, something delicate and soft inside. But a nigger bitch seems to be full of steel granite hard and resisting, not soft and submissive like a white woman. Ain't nothing more beautiful than a white woman's hair.... She is like a goddess, a symbol. (159)

Though black men have always been fighting against oppression, they themselves have been tyrannical towards their own women folks. African American women have been raped beaten, disparaged, hated, and mutilated by African American men with the same intensity as white males. African American men have always held their view that all the oppression by the whites has crippled them but not the femininity of black women. Bell Hooks writes:

Although black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era, black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values. As black men advanced in all spheres of American life—they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role. (4)

Thus, an African American woman is caught between crossfire's of racism and sexism and bears the oppression from both white as well as black men. She finds herself pushed to the brink. Just as she has been affected by racism, similarly she is also crippled by sexism. Just as white men have exploited her, so have black men.

African American women also suffer from classicism. They are the least privileged compared to white men, white women and African American males. They are positioned on the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder. Right from the days of slavery, though she has been working equally alongside black men, but she is considered as the least deserving. Harihar Kulkarni aptly describes in the following passage how African American women have been systematically economically robbed and suppressed: The dark power operating behind slavery is capitalist tendencies of industrial nations. They are constantly in need of cheap or free labor for profiteering. The economics behind this promoted slavery. And black women are more submissive than their men, they were more and more in plantations. The planter was the slave owner. And it was the cruelest economic system that it considered the black women as a labor machine or an animal which can be made to do any work, in the fields and at homes. The men centered patriarchal system reinforced the power structure.

The American slavery that was basically embedded in capitalistic ideals exploited black women as an essential part of labor force. The economics of slavery forced black woman into a precarious situation. As a black, she was exploited for her skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops, as a woman she was also asked to perform a reproductive role vital to the planter's financial interest and to the interest of the expansive system of slavery in general. The slave owner or the planter often took a more crudely opportunistic approach towards the labor of slave women....He exploited his bondswomen not only on the fields for cutting canes, and picking cotton but also for washing, ironing, or working in the house. The slave owner's practice of using black women as the active agents of a labor force and reserving certain tasks for women exclusively demonstrated how patriarchal and capitalistic assumptions concerning black women's work could reinforce each other. (57)

African American women have been taking care of their children, their family and are an integral part of the African American social milieu, but she is the most ignored class. She has less of everything that would make half for a decent life. Thus, they are economically downtrodden and in the most vulnerable position, and live the life of invisible citizens in America.

While triple oppression is clearly evident and has marred African American women's lives, some critics are not satisfied with this 'triple oppression' theory. They often believe that African American women have faced even more severe oppressive conditions. Deborah King in —Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness states that African American women not only face triple oppression but also other forms of disempowerments. All these many forms of disenfranchisement results in exponential disempowerment. King explains, —The modifier 'multiple' refers not to several simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism, multiplied by classicism (297). Whether it is —double jeopardy, —triple oppression or —multiple jeopardy it is clearly evident that it has profoundly affected every African American woman's life.

America is a country of mischief for material progress and creation of wealth. The poignant stories of black women exposes the varieties of pain is caused by the racist, sexist and patriarchal whites in America. It represents a civilization of people with self imposed blindness and of hazy moral sensibilities. The black feminine selfhood was alienated and pushed into the corner of ignominy. An array of batteries of degrading myths, secrets and lies were used to keep them in duress. They were constantly brainwashed and they were in loss of identity. They underwent an existential crisis, not knowing who they really were and what choices and power they had. The moderns American ideology disabled these women from interpreting their realities through their own point of view. They were more or less calibamized. Harihar kulkarni is very exact in stating that black women could not challenge the interstructure of her multiple oppression ,could never really lay any claim to her true heritage and cultural past and finally, could not liberate herself in true sense'.

## II. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the twentieth century has been a ground breaking era for African American women writers. It is in this era that they finally came out of the shadows of racism and sexism and created works without any inhibitions. They engendered a tradition of African American women's literature. Twentieth century African American women writers did not start writing suddenly. They were enriching a tradition which existed much earlier. Earlier writers had built a secure platform for these twentieth century writers. Thus the roots of the twentieth century African American women writers goes way back to the times when African American women were not free citizens. Foster and Davis write:

It was something that should not have happened, but did. Almost from the day they first set foot upon North American soil, women of African descent were creating a literature. Before the United States came into being, African American women were publishing in a variety of genres and on many topics.

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