



'THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK' : READING BLACK FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION

Madhuri Goswami
Lecturer in English
Govt. Postgraduate College
Chomu-303702, Jaipur
Rajasthan

Received : 30/05/2017

1st BPR : 04/06/2017

2nd BPR : 10/06/2017

Accepted : 17/06/2017

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to study and theorize the concept of Black consciousness with special reference to the Black women authors. It, further, attempts to sketch the evolvement of this consciousness, and finds its development, overtly or covertly, in social, political, and literary ambits swayed by movements, laws and literary works. The paper finds the Black consciousness being three faceted and the sense of belonging to past, culture and legacy as an inherent and prominent characteristic of it. It, also, finds that African American fiction by women authors express the need to sustain cultural memory and reclaim Black consciousness as quintessential milestones in their journey of self-assertion.

Keywords : Consciousness, Black Feminist Consciousness, Intellectual Discrimination, Black Culture, Claim for Existence

Bernard W. Bell writes,

“Radical Protestantism, Constitutional democracy, and global industrial capitalism are the White American trinity of values. In contrast, black American values emanate from a cyclical, Judeo-Christian vision of history and of African Americans as a disinherited, colonized people, a vision that sanction their resilience of spirit and pursuit of social justice...an extraordinary faith in the redemptive power of suffering and patience, A highly developed talent for dissimulation, a vigorous zest for life...are basic black American values” (Bell, *Contemporary* 77-78).

These issues and themes constitute the main content of the African American novel, conspicuously, in the writings of Black women writers as they have the consciousness of being Black and female in a White dominated society. These Black women have confronted the negative shades of social exclusion and segregation along with familial neglect and ejection. They have been bound to live in a social ghetto as marginalized section of society. It is quite tangible to read the concept of consciousness to explore the Black female consciousness in the African American fiction. Though, the discussion may occasionally bring in male Black writers for the purpose of theorizing and studying the concept of Black consciousness, in general, in male Black writers.

The definition of consciousness is generally given as the state of being aware of and responsive to one's surroundings. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines it as “the condition of being conscious/a person's mind and thought/knowledge that is shared by a group of people” (“Consciousness”). This state of awareness is nurtured in individuals in various degrees depending on upbringing and surrounding of them. In fact, the nurturing of the human being is the sole key to forming consciousness



and, it, eventually, creates identity. Allan Prince Okech and Rick Harrington have sought to define Black consciousness as “an individual's beliefs or attitudes about his or her self, own race, and the White majority vis-à-vis the Black experience” (214). Several researchers have documented the stages or levels that a Black individual undergoes toward achieving a sound Black consciousness or racial identity. Cross, in 1973, has stated that African Americans can progress in a linear sequential mode through four distinctive stages of Black consciousness. Cross's four stages of Black consciousness are, in progressive order, pre-encounter, encounter, immersion, and internalization. Each of these stages is described by an individual's perceptions, feelings, and attitudes toward other African Americans, toward Whites, and toward the self (267-285). Sue, in 1981, has opined that Black consciousness levels and subsequent perceptions of the cause of their individual conditions determine how African Americans view themselves and the outside world. Parham, in 1989, has expanded on Cross's model and viewed the progression through these racial identity stages as cyclical rather than linear. Thus, a person may cycle back to a previous stage, stagnate, or move forward.

In fact, the African American people are one of the many uniquely ethnic races who have struggled over many generations to find identity in the country of the United States. From the onset of slavery in the United States in the early seventeenth century to the present time, African Americans have struggled, physically as well as socially and all the more psychologically, to establish themselves as equal human beings. They have lived years of atrocities, afflictions and pangs developing their consciousness accordingly.

The consciousness of being Black has been evolved through literary world as well as socially, politically through movements, laws and literary works. The two hundred and forty six year existence of slavery in the United States of America presented the idea of slave consciousness as in the writings of Frederick Douglass. The protagonist of his work, *The Heroic Slave*, Madison Washington has an awareness of his status as a slave and knows he must escape it one way or another. He, quite perplexed in the grip of slavehood, asks, “What then, is life to me?” (Douglass 8). This questioning spirit shows the rising awareness of the exploited self of Blacks. Black writers strive to imprint the contribution of Black people in the making of America in such a dimension of hostility. James Baldwin in *From Notes of a Native Son: Stranger in the Village* says,

“The idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization (the present civilization, which is the only one that matters; all previous civilizations are simply contributions to our own) and are therefore civilization's guardians and defenders. Thus it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men” (Baldwin qtd. in *Bell Bearing Witness* 140).

The years of Reconstruction, after the end of the American Civil War (1850-1865), brought a whole new problem for the African Americans. Freedom was now a reality for all Blacks as well as Whites, although one would have inevitable doubts based on the treatment that nearly all Blacks received during this time. Education was also another opportunity that suddenly became apparent to the African American conscience. In the philosophies of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, two different levels of consciousness are seen. In a famous passage in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois characterizes Black American existence in terms of “a peculiar sensation of “double-consciousness”” (3). “One ever feels his two-ness”, he writes, “—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife...” (3). In the period from the Revolution to the Civil war the “double-consciousness” of being Black and being American, of which Du Bois speaks, comes into sharp focus for free Blacks in the Northern States. The next great period of development in the African American consciousness came about in the form of the Harlem



Renaissance during the 1920's and 1930's. Some of the great works of Black authors of the time reflect Black consciousness. Social and economical issues were also being addressed more directly and thoroughly than previous years. This period beholds the venture of Blacks to substantiate the Afro-centric roots. In the works of African American writers, such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison, the African American consciousness is inherent with a sense of belonging to African American community. The Black consciousness speaks of a sense of belonging to African American community as one of the major concerns in the African American literary work. In the case of African American literature the consciousness of being Black is not gender bound. Nor is it bound to economic classes. It's quite pervasive. However, the focus is limited here to the particular shape of Black consciousness in African American fiction with special reference to Black women writers.

The seeds of cultivating Black Feminist thought may be traced to 1831 in Maria W. Stewart when she asked, "How long shall the fair daughters of America be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath the load of iron pots and kettles?" (Richardson 38). As the first Black American woman to address public on political issues, Stewart foreshadowed a variety of themes taken up by her Black feminist successors. Collins writes, "Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African American women's intellectual tradition" (2-3). Although such a rich intellectual tradition existed, it remained virtually invisible for a long time. Many African American intellectuals worked hard but, unfortunately, in isolation and obscurity like Zora Neale Hurston. Some of them got recognition but quite late. In fact, the Black women's point of view in the literary and political circles of mainstream White society was invisible by the early 1970s. Two other African American women, Gwendolyn Brooks, a poet, and Lorraine Hansberry, a playwright, had been published in the 1960s; their writings did not receive the due acclamation in the national literature. Nellie McKay, an editor and scholar of American and Afro-American literature, notes that at least fifty-nine books by African American women were in print between 1859 and 1964. And in the 1920s and 1930s, only one woman, Jesse Fauset, had published three novels. While other African American women writers had come before Toni Morrison, few had received much acknowledgement for their work from mainstream literary discourse. Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison have created a hope to bring attention to African American women writers and their role in literature. The consciousness of being a Black and a woman underlines the composition of these writers with a sense of belonging to African American culture and community.

Black women in America have been pushed to the margins not only by the White society but also by their own community. The trio of race, class and gender marginalizes these women into hapless life governed by isolation, inferiority and agony. To quote Gloria Jean Wade-Gayles:

"There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflects degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow spare, 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. There are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America" (3-4).

Black women's lives have been replete with atrocities and are relegated to the border on the basis of their gender. Working for a living, these women have endured horrible and intimidating conditions on account of racism, sexism and class hierarchy. The mechanism of these three brings in the social and psychological exploitation in the lives of African Americans in general and Black women in particular. Black Women in America have been victimized not only by racist, sexist, and class biases, but also by intellectual inattention. Yet, they have tried to intimate the world about their plight, their search for emancipation and attempted at self-redemption through literary expression. Patricia Hills Collins



records the cause of this scholarly neglect in these words, "The shadow obscuring this complex Black women's intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign" (3). In fact the scholarly neglect culminates from the socio-political inequalities meted out by Blacks (more adversely by Black women) making it easier for the mainstream hegemony and patriarchal domination to execute power on this subordinate group placed in vacuum.

The account of African American literature speaks of the vision and comprehension of Black culture, myth and community in the running century. Perhaps, it is this sense of belonging and comprehension of their culture, past, myth, language and legacy which has woven the texture of their work with the threads of Black consciousness. The Black women writings present three faceted consciousnesses - consciousness of being a Black, being an American and being a woman. The fiction writers like Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eyes*), and Toni Cade Bambara (*The Salt Eaters*) depict the traumatic conditions of Black women ranging from lower to middle class at the same time emerging with a sense of existence and self-reliance.

Zora Neale Hurston in her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* sets the protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford, on the path for searching of her own identity and independence having a spiritual communication with the community. The author, artistically, projects the current of Black feminist consciousness in the Janie's voice of selfhood and empowerment through using rural Southern Black dialect. Alice Walker's theory of *Womanism* has been a remarkable output of the Black female consciousness. "The Black Woman" says Alice Walker "is one of America's greatest heroes...Not enough credit has been given to the Black women who have been oppressed beyond recognition" (as noted by Sinha 46). The year 1970 beheld a wave of African American women's writing challenging the African American male literary tradition, with the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes, "This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet independent of the Black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison" (*Reading Black* 2).

Although the surge of creative vigour to outlet the consciousness of African American women, especially in fiction, started quite earlier than Morrison's appearance on the scene, her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is generally seen as one of its milestone texts. Toni Morrison, the first Black American woman to win a Nobel Prize for Literature, indicates an exigency to assert the artistic and political trait or value of Blackness within and against the ideological and cultural dominance of Whiteness. In an interview with Christina Davis in 1986, Morrison asserts that "the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance...and the job of recovery is ours" (Morrison qtd. in Gates, Jr. and Appiah 413). Her statement highlights a major theme of her work. She finds the affirmation of Black existence in the requisite resurgence of Black culture. The characters of Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*, Son in *Tar Baby*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Shadrack in *Sula*, and Baby Suggs in *Beloved* affirm and rejuvenate Black identity. Bambara in *The Salt Eaters*, through the dialogue between Velma Henry and Minnie Ransom, discusses the healing properties of Black culture in the backdrop of the civil rights movement. In this novel, the element of Black Feminist consciousness has emerged through highlighting Black political culture and collective memory. It, also, depicts the ability of Blacks to rebuild themselves even amid adverse situations.

The study of Black feminist consciousness in African American fiction indicates to an inherent exigency among authors to assert the artistic and political trait or value of Blackness within and against the ideological and cultural dominance of Whiteness. This consciousness is not limited to being a Black female, being exploited, being discarded, being marginalized or just injustice; this further adds the meaning to identity, selfhood, and empowerment of Black female existence. The visions and voices of the writers, their perspectives, their histories and legacies aim to spell out the legitimacy of their constant



striving for rehabilitation through exempting from neglect and marginalization. This consciousness of being exploited, marginalized and expelled produce a longing among them to overcome the abjectness of their lives and to rely in self through preservation of their culture, rituals, traditions and customs.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Bernard W. *Bearing Witness of African American Literature: Validating and Valorizing Its Authority, Authenticity and Agency*. Michigan, USA: Wayne State University Press, 2012. Print.
- ---. *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Roots and Modern Literary Branches*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. Print.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- "Consciousness." *Merriam-Webster Online*. Merriam-Webster, 2011. Web. 21 May 2012. / <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consciousness/>
- Cross, W. E., Jr. "The Negro to Black Conversion." *The Death of White Sociology*. Ed. A. J. Ladner. New York: Random House, 1973. 267-286. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.
- Douglass, Fredrick. *The Heroic Slave: A Thrilling Narrative of the Adventures of Madison Washington*. African American Heritage Classics. Radford, VA: Wildside Press, 2008. Print.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis, ed. Introduction. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. By Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990, pp.1-20. Print.
- --and, Anthony K. Appiah, eds. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Soloman*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- ---. *Sula*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- ---. *Tar Baby*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- Okech, Allan Prince, and Rick Harrington. "The Relationship among Black Consciousness, Self-Esteem, and Academic Self-Efficacy in African American Men." *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*. Informa UK Ltd. (Taylor and Francis Online) 136.2 (2002): 214-224. Online Published on 02 Apr. 2010. Web. 31 Jan., 2012. / <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00223980209604151/>
- Richardson, Marilyn, ed. *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press. 1987. Print.
- Sinha, Sunita. *Post-colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008. Print.
- Sue, Derald Wing, *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice*. New York: John Wiley, 1981. Print.
- Wade-Gayles, Gloria Jean. *No Crystal Stair: Vision of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984. Print.

