
An Analysis of Black Womanhood and Female Identity in Africa and its Diaspora

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In exploring the idea of black womanhood and female identity in Africa and its diaspora it is necessary to examine the questions of black womanhood in consonance with the cultural notions of black women and analyse the ways in which they perceive and represent themselves both within and outside the traditional moulds of their societies.

It is important to look at how black women from Africa and America write their experiences as women and specifically explore, the histories and self-perceptions as articulated in the writings of the two contemporary black women writers from Africa and America; namely Bessie Head and Alice Walker. Reacting against distorted and marginalizing constructions in black men's texts, these writers depict a black womanhood which challenges this very marginality in literature as well as society. I understand that the writers' concerns, focus and narrative strategies contribute to an understanding of the ways in which black women perceive themselves. Their varied experiences, perceptions and sensibilities as women are informed and shaped by their geographical locations, backgrounds and relationships to their societies. Their narrative points of view grounded in their history, reflect the diversity and complex reality of black women's lives and thereby contribute to the current debate on black womanhood. Thus, these two writers create a variety of characters, who portray individual as well as communal, class and gender-specific conflicts rendered by their socio-historical realities.

In *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*, Gay Alden Wilentz (1992) argues that the "history of black women's literature, which started long before black women were finally allowed their right to literacy, was rooted in and conveyed through storytelling" (xi). Yet since the oral word was never regarded as literature, what these women said "about themselves" did not cross the threshold of their communities (Senior 1988, Aidoo 1967). Black men's portrayals of both men and women's experiences were offered as representations of the reality of allblack people's lives. In an interview with Anna Rutherford after the publication of his *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Chinua Achebe concedes men's misrepresentation of black women and black womanhood. Black women characters have always been on the 'periphery' and almost liminal in appearance. African American women writers attempt to 're-construct' through their creative writing such a pre-conceived stereotype of the black American women. The task in favour of the writers is two-fold - one, to subvert this negative 'stereotype' and second, to create an image of the women in all its entirety. their works shed light on the essential experience of non-Western modes of consciousness that is misrepresented in the works of mainstream American and European

women writers. To subvert unjust stereotypes of all sorts, ethnic-minority women writers gradually started appearing, challenging the one-sidedness of mainstream American writers.

Obioma Nnaemeka (1995) points out that “one of the misfortunes of the currently proliferating analyses of African women’s writing be it from black male critics or from western feminist theorists is the tendency to ‘rename, misname, and silence’” (80). Despite the “awesome odds” (Owusu 1992) against them, black women writers have persisted with their determination to correct distorted images of the black woman (Chukukere 1995) and “to present reality from their own point of view.” This study is an attempt to explore some of the ways in which black women writers have been or are contributing to the current debate on black womanhood.

Steering clear of an African identity that does not go beyond geographically constrained boundaries, I encompass all women of African descent in Africa and all the African diaspora. Such an exercise will bridge the gap between black people in Africa and those in the black diaspora. It is integral to demonstrate that by virtue of their African descent women from the African diaspora share similar positions of marginalization as black women from Africa. What differentiates them are their geographic locations, socio-historical circumstances and experiences. Examining the works of authors shows how their texts are supported by a body of values and perceptions that have been shaped by their individual experiences of racial, social, and gender-identity and marginalization. In some cases, sexual preference contributes to the author’s sense of difference. In addition to this the leading axis has also been to locate and explore the common threads which bring the texts together, despite their conspicuous cultural, historical, linguistic and geographical differences resulting in their experiences as artists, women and descendants of African slaves. Nevertheless, these connecting “threads,” to use one of Paule Marshall’s recurrent images, converge in determining a common ground particular to the narratives of African American and African women. Therefore, while addressing the links that connect these texts with larger categories (i.e. the novel, autobiography, African American literary traditions, literature by women), the study also clearly purports to foreground the specificity of each of these narratives. What is also fundamental is the contribution of these writers to the representation of black female selves and how through their textual voice and their diverse and varied experiences as black women they reflect their own specific geographical locations. Finally, the premise is that although they are concerned with similar issues, like the oppressed situation of black women in their countries, they also share the belief and vision that integrated societies is the only way forward towards progress and development of their societies.