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A SELF IDENTITY OF AFRICAN - AMERICAN WRITERS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The self-identity is a crucial concept in African-American women's literature. The self-esteem represents one of the major themes touched upon in the works of many women writers, and especially those of minority origin. Stemming from the specific historical evidence of oppression and inequality, women of minority groups face problems of racism, sexism, and unequal standing in the surrounding society. They are confronted with the majority's ideals and worldviews regarding the three main constituent parts of black women's self-esteem that recognize as skin color and racial identity, the role of sexuality and motherhood, and the portrayal of beauty and self-esteem. This paper deals with the self-esteem, skin colour and racial identity and the socio-political consideration of beauty among the African-American Black Women

Key Words: racial identity, sexuality, motherhood, portrayal of beauty, self esteem

INTRODUCTION

The biggest contribution to the African-American literature rests in that the novel speaks openly about the racist nature of white mass culture and explores the ways in which class division based on skin color affects black girls' growing-up and their personality-forming. One of the famous novel writer Toni Morrison, the novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is the first novel written by Toni Morrison, an African-American writer who has become one of the top black female writers in the United States. *The Bluest Eye* can be characterized as addressing the timeless problem of white racial dominance in the U.S.A. and pointing to the impact it has on the life of a black girl growing up in the 1930s.

The main constituent parts of black women's self-esteem that recognize as skin color and racial identity, the role of sexuality and motherhood, and the portrayal of beauty and self-esteem, these three topics play a central role in constructing black women's self-identity and self-image, and become

the most decisive components shaping a minority woman's attitudes to herself and the world. Black women have to reconcile with the majority standards of the majority imposed on them, and endeavour to find the true black womanhood through exploration of the past and experiences of the present. Throughout history, the formation of African-American women's self-esteem has been marked by considerable discrimination based on their racial as well as gender distinctiveness. The experiences African-American women have faced historically have influenced every aspect of their lives and have become reflected in their writings that often describe how unattainable it is to be a confident, coequal member of a society in which white man's power and white women's flawless morality and beauty are taken for granted as standards.

The reason why African-American women's reality differs significantly from the rest of the society may be incorporated in the ways in which

the prevalent white standards impact and reduce black women's self-esteem. The racism and sexism have diminished African-American women's role in the society and have influenced their self-understanding. When struggling against these, African-American women writers consider it imperative to change the implications of negative images attributed to black women during the times of slavery and beyond. These represent an obstacle in their way towards equality and many African-American and women have considered the creation of more adequate images of black womanhood crucial. The way to start the fight is to pay attention to the issues that make African-American and women's life experience different from the rest of the society. Authors have contributed to notion of self-esteem by looking for their character's identity and by elevating the blackness and femaleness as the very basis of their existence, and most importantly by loving and respecting themselves.

Critics recognize the relevance of Toni Morrison's writing for the African-American community and its women. As Darlene Clark Hine suggests in Black Women in America encyclopaedia,

"In her works, [Toni Morrison] strips away the idols of whiteness and of Blackness that have prevented Blacks in the United States from knowing themselves and gives them their own true, mythical, remembered words to live by" [1].

SKIN COLOR AND RACIAL IDENTITY

This is concerned with how the belonging to a particular racial type influences of African-American women and their position in the world. Being the most evident determinant of race and the fundamental of phenotypic features, skin color is described as shaping all spheres of a black woman's life, including the following two spheres of sexuality and motherhood and the portrayal of beauty and self-esteem. The idea of self-esteem is subjected to the interplay of these with skin color and racial identity, the most important element in the lives of African-American women.

The concept of race, it is an artificial category created by the Caucasian society in order to maintain the position of supreme power and to facilitate conquest. The institution of slavery in the Americas originates in conceptions about the

intellectual as well as moral inferiority of the black people. Many stereotypes about black people were created and maintained as justifications for their subjugation.

The concept of color represents a significant part in the self-evaluation of black women. Skin color determines a black woman's identity and attitudes about the self, and historically speaking, it was upon this concept that the institution of slavery was mainly founded in the North American region. One's skin color and phenotypic features became significant for a person's social status according to the prevailing principles of racism and colorism. Colorism, has been defined by Thompson as,

"embodies preference and desire for both light skin as well as other attendant features. Hair, eye color, and facial features function along with color in complex ways to shape opportunities, norms regarding attractiveness, self-concept, and overall body image". [2]

THE ROLE OF SEXUALITY AND MOTHERHOOD

Sexuality clearly represents one of the most intimate parts of the self of every human being. Psychological, cultural, social, political and spiritual aspects contribute to the forming of a person's sexual identity and develop over the course of time and history. I reminded by Mitchell that "one's sexuality is culturally constructed". In the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' position of women in the society, was dominated by the white patriarchy:

"the white patriarchy constructed gender specifically in ways that served to control female sexuality and to ensure the interests of White male supremacy, [and thus] the exploitation and misappropriation of the Black women's sexuality are not surprising". [3]

The topic of sexuality is closely related to human reproduction and mothering. The concept of abuse connects the notions of motherhood and sexuality when speaking about black women. Motherhood forms an important part of a woman's life and through her attitude towards it a woman's identity and worldview is demonstrated. In the case of African-American and African cultures, their women's motherhood has been burdened by the implications that slavery placed on them. Coming

from the stereotypical assumption about their animal-like nature, slave women were considered “breeders”. Being a carrier of the future lineage of the black race in America, the female slave in the past had to cope with the difficult position of bringing up children under the condition of slavery. This was an especially cruel situation considering that the child inherited its mother’s “chattel” status and literally increased the slave master’s property. Enslaved women were deprived of their right to decide for their personal matters such as child-bearing and up-bringing, and it was not an exception for a child to be separated from its mother when it was still small.

For those authors that consider sexuality and motherhood inseparable, motherhood is what distinguishes women from the rest of the society, and the fact that black women could not control their mothering and the destinies of their children forms the basis of an important clash in the relationship between the masters and the slaves. Slavery also drastically altered but did not completely annihilate the traditional role of African women in the family or the community in the sense that it left her basically unprotected while still forming the nucleus of the community.

Their experience of not being able to control what in Africa was the most important part of a woman’s live, the black women’s struggle for freedom became closely related to the fact that :

“[the] fundamental tension between Black women and the rest of society involved a multifaceted struggle to determine who could control their productive and reproductive capacities and their sexuality”. [4]

The Black feminist movement became concerned early on with the themes of black female sexuality, motherhood and self-esteem that are later.

THE PORTRAYAL OF BEAUTY AND SELF-ESTEEM

The ways in which Black people view themselves in terms of self-esteem and affirmation of their blackness become closely connected to the concept of beauty. Beauty by its dictionary description signifies the quality of being pleasing to the senses of others and when talking about a person, beauty has become synonymous to a matter

of physical characteristics. In Peg Zeglin Brand’s essay examining the various approaches to the concept, beauty is defined as *“the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, social-political philosophy, and cultural criticism”* [5]. The first theories that took race into account when speaking about a person’s attractiveness, held that *“within the standards of different races, the criteria for what is called beauty are the same as those of the Western tradition”* [6]. With the appearance of feminist writings, the racial, sexual, and cultural aspects of beauty became addressed and *“the neutrality of purportedly objective and universal statements about beauty”* was challenged.

Moreover, black feminists considered the fight against “dualistic thinking about good and bad” on the field of beauty and representation that taught black people to “cherish hateful images of themselves” very necessary. Bell hooks, for example, sees *“loving blackness as a prerequisite for emancipation of the whole black community”* [7]. When I link beauty with the formation of a black woman self-understanding, I have to be aware of the *“internalized white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates [their values]”* [8].

According to the traditional belief of the Western modern civilization, the idea of beauty, as evidence of worth and self-assertion, matters more to women than men. Among the qualities that were originally elevated in a woman by the European society are delicacy, refinement, moral nobility, and sensitivity. In the process of colonization, these standards and beliefs were introduced together with the ideas of white supremacy and the concept of “white beauty was based on the racist assumption of black ugliness”, providing an effective explanation for black women’s oppression and uncomplimentary position. These concepts are often confronted in the literature by black female writers and feminists who stress *“the realization that a white-dominated culture has racialized beauty, [and] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty”*. [9]

Since the first encounter of European and African cultures, women of color have been viewed according to the prevailing white standards that the society appropriated. Together with other factors,

this causes the devaluation of black womanhood and creation of unflattering prejudices to be rooted in the society.

CONCLUSION

The idea of black girl's growing up and searching for her identity is a theme that reappears in Toni Morrison's novels. The young female characters are all faced with the negative images regarding black skin color and perceive lightness and white looks as desirable and privileged. While in the United States, the girl characters deny their appearance in the light of white beauty models, in the Caribbean they are confronted with the higher-class opinion stating that the lighter the better, a means to become distinguished from the black majority. Being the most vulnerable to others' evaluations, the girls represent a triple oppression of being female, being of African descent and a child. The author promotes self-consciousness and black beauty as the ideology to grow up with. Exalting black beauty becomes also important when speaking about adult women, such as Toni Morrison main character from her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* whose wish is to eliminate erroneous representations of black women in pornography. Her self-esteem is pending on her ability to understand herself as a beautiful strong woman capable of creating her own life and reality on her own.

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