Abstract

Postcolonial African American Female Writers and their Three-Way battle against Imperialism, Canonization, and Sexism: Developing a New Multicultural Feminism

by

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Female writers continue to remind us of the differences between themselves and males and the separate struggles they face. For a woman, the task of liberation through writing must include also a thrash against the establishment created by male power, in this case, white-male power. Writings by women must be successful in relaying the unique female experience; one unlike that of their male counterparts. However, the works by women of color are constantly attacked and often dismissed as feministic, sexist, one-sided and the like. Fortunately, this has not discouraged the female "voice" from emerging. Writers such as Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and countless others have created a new space for the discussion of the female experience

within postcolonial settings; moreover, their work has and continues to rage a three-way battle against imperialism, canonization, and sexism.

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Table of Contents

Chapter I

Introduction

-Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

Dating back to the dawn of time and the inception of the first man, the Christian origin of woman, delineates her creation as Eve of Adam "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them" (Gen. 1:26). Although man and woman are both created of God, they are different. Hurston supports this idea of difference in her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She adds to the aforementioned excerpt stating "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they [women] act and do things accordingly" (1).

Female writers continue to remind us of the differences between males and females 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, more appropriately, women of color who "had no alternative but to discover and define

themselves through their writings in order to liberate themselves" (19). The liberating act of writing for women of color is therefore of greater importance and precedence than for women who have not been classified as racial "other". Specifically, the patriarchal system which places the male in dominance over the female is a structure which quantifiably 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, in the past and presently, continues to create "a new territory for postcolonial women" (Deena 19).

Within this "new territory" the postcolonial woman is able to assert an authority, which had previously manifested itself only in their role as caregiver, mother, worker, or servant. The postcolonial woman, as revisited through female writers of color, exposes the ever present strife engendered by imperialism, canonization, and sexism. It is here that the argument of this presented research is directed.

My investigation specifically targets works written by women of color. By examining selected works, I seek to reveal the unique experiences of African American women, as well as highlight the varying methods in which the works fight against the triangular establishments of imperialism, canonization, and sexism. To do this I will examine key works by African American women; discussing elements of their works to include: theme, dialogue, characters, settings, etc., and reveal evidence of these battles as waged through the works themselves. I will also highlight relevant criticism that directly criticizes the

writers and their works. This research will also relate comparative experiences of women of other ethnic backgrounds to include Indian, Hispanic, and Asian to the exclusion of Caucasian and European women.

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. The woman of the modern world has grown substantially, despite the existence of past and present forms of encumbrance. Yet, how did the modern woman make it to this point? Fittingly, the modern woman has overcome numerous obstacles to achieve placement within a patriarchal society. This feat is no less miraculous for African American women, or for that matter, women of color whose battle has, on one hand, mirrored that of European descended women. On the other hand, their battle has been plagued by the unique structure established by colonialism. The modern woman of color has been forced to be "the mule of the world" (Hurston *Eyes* 14). She has carried the weight of the world for some time now, and her story is very significant.

Methodology

This investigation has been formulated according to other forms of descriptive research, which seeks to analyze presented information while presenting new or emerging ideas. This study will attempt to provide a space for the analysis of literary works, which share commonalities derived from cultural and societal roots of their authors. I will also note evidence of the existence of particularized struggles for African American women and, to an extent, ethnic

women within the postcolonial setting. By taking works by these writers, I will depict struggles as expressed by the fictitious characters in their works, as well as points of conflict derived from the writer's personal lives. This will be accomplished by using New Historicism literary theory. Various forms of literary criticisms have been collected to concur, dispute, or qualify the existence of noted struggles presented to African Americans within the postcolonial setting.

To complete this study I have collected works by Phillis Wheatley, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. Although they are not the only noteworthy African American women authors, their writings and lives are exemplary of the struggles faced by other women. Of their writings, my focus will center on Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*; Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Within each of the aforementioned works are examples of the struggles of African American women and their battles against imperialism, canonization, and sexism. However, these critical texts are not alone in the evidence they bring forth on this particular subject.

Writings by other women from various ethnic backgrounds to include, Asian, Indian, and Hispanic (Latino/Mexican/Spanish) will be revealed in this investigation. To fully document claims made in this investigation, I will reveal through brief examination parallels between African American female authors and other females of ethnic descent. The use of these works will also help repudiate claims that the struggles of each ethnic group are different. Conversely, their

brief examination herein will display the connectedness amongst the world created by the powers of colonialism.

Writers of Focus

The writings of African American women reveal their individual struggles against canonization, imperialism, and sexism. The experiences dictated by women contrast sharply with those examined in texts written by men. The women and their respective works selected for this study have all made significant contributions to the field of literature. Their works, as diverse as they are, speak to the heart of the aforementioned struggles faced by women around the world. Each woman's unique past is pivotal to understanding its impact on their writing.

Phillis Wheatley was the first African American to have her work published in English. Wheatley, an African-born slave from Gambia was owned by Mr. John Wheatley. Surprisingly, the Wheatley family took an interest in talent exhibited by their slave. This is evidenced by their encouraging her education. The Wheatley's allowed her to study the Bible and geography, as well as read English Literature and History. Wheatley was considered a prodigy. She acquired measurable skill in the English language in only four short years. Wheatley's owners eventually reduced her works as a slave to allow her more time to write.

Some of Wheatley's most recognized works include: "To His Excellency George Washington", "An Address to the Atheist", "To His Honor the Lieutenant

Governor on the death of his Lady", and "To the Right and Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth". The publishing of her writings provided a point of contrast toward the prevalent thought that Africans were ignorant and incapable of producing delicate work such as writing. Wheatley is central to a study concerning African American women writers due to her contribution as the first writer of color in America. Furthermore, her writings would establish criteria by which the masses would gauge literature by minorities, such as Zora Neale Hurston.

Zora Neale Hurston was born in the American south and came of age in the first all-black township of Eatonville, Florida. It is well documented how Zora's matriculation within the small community would go on to shape the writer she would become; a writer in touch with the varied mysticism and singular sound of the black south. Hurston is widely recognized for her contributions to the "New Negro Movement", affectionately referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's diverse literary portfolio includes: *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Mules and Men*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Seraph on the Swanee.* Hurston is also the author of several other shorter works such as her essay, "How it Feels to be Colored Me". Zora best represents the transition of power from the past to modern writers Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

Writer Alice Walker is well noted for her prolific writings heralding the struggles of African American women. She is also a constant critic of established forms of feminism-going so far as to establish "Womanism", that is, a form of

feminism that incorporates specific qualities indigenous to experiences of African American women. Alice Walker spent time working to fight for equality during the Civil Rights Movement. This sense of pride pours over into her writings. Walker's works have been duly noted for their empowerment of the female voice.

Accordingly, Walker is credited for her attempt to reveal the three types of black women characters she felt were missing from literature in the United States (Gates & Mckay 2425). Walker asserts that these are women who have been exploited physically and emotionally; women who have been victimized by "psychic violence", and women who are able to move past their oppressions to grasp a sense of "wholeness" (Gates & Mckay 2425). Therefore, a study of the African American female writer must include one of its most vocal proponents as presented by Alice Walker. The writings of Walker offer an easy segway to poet laureate, Toni Morrison.

Similarly, Morrison continues the tradition of creating writings that speak for oppressed women and against the misogynistic ideals purported by a patriarchal society. As the first African American woman to receive a Nobel prize for Literature, Morrison continues to defy the limits established by the traditional canon. The crux of Morrison's writings stem from her prodigious use of mystical elements in conjunction with her detailing of the African American experience to include: "racial, gender and class conflict" (Dipasquale). Toni Morrison's works are relative to this study due to their sublime dictation of the African American experience.

Through each of her works, Morrison details a unique experience; ranging from the slave narrative of Sethe in *Beloved*, The Cosey Women in *Love*, and the troubled youth, Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison explains that each work must "write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people -- people who can't be faked, people who don't need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria" (qtd. in Dipasquale). Therefore, the works of Morrison, have like those of Wheatley, Hurston, and Walker, helped to establish the black female voice in a world which continues its attempt to silence it.

Exclusions

The study of the previously noted African American women and their struggles with imperialism, canonization, and sexism will attempt foremost to be a body of work representative of an in depth look into specific literatures and authors whose works provide evidence of the numerous effects of colonialism on ethnic minority women as exhibited through literary discourse. However, as that there are countless bodies of work which may be considered purposeful for this type of study there is a need herein to establish specific limitations of this research. One of such limitations is the inclusion of African American female authors.

For the purpose of this study the writers in question are not necessarily authors whose works significantly stand above works created and written by other African American women. In relation to other African American female

authors, their works will not be of direct discussion within this research. Any discussion relative to the study of other African American female writers will exist to support arguments made in reference to the aforementioned writers for whom this study examines. I will not attempt to discuss in detail any other writers, yet there may be general references to other works by African American women or Euro-descended women. Again, the inclusion or notation of these works will only work to document claims made in effort to prove the central argument of this research.

Within this research, I will discuss the existing theories relative to feminism, sexism, canonization, and imperialism. This presented research will not attempt to support, refute, or qualify those theories. The purpose of this research will be to discuss those theories while supporting, refuting, or making qualifications through specific bodies of literature only. This work is not designed to persuade the reader to believe any one theory; however, it is the aim of this work to highlight and reveal existing effects, which may or may not stem directly from the previously noted areas.

Chapter II

Declaring the Battle Field

The study of literature by default is quite naturally a reaching task. There are countless literary works to choose from. As it relates directly to this study, the discussion of African American women and their struggle against the establishments built by colonialism offers with them select accompaniments of scholarly research and criticism. The discussion of this topic therefore is also inclusive of works such as: books, essays, critical readings, criticisms, and literary defenses, which all in turn provide an examination of topics included within this research. Therefore, it is important that one recognizes those pieces, which have added to this research substantially. The aforementioned writings are essential in establishing the battle between the African American laureate and the triangular opposition presented by imperialism, canonization, and sexism.

Literature Review

A work whose presence acts as an intermediary within this presented research is Seodial F. H. Deena's. This work is singularly responsible for providing the focus for this topic. In his book, Deena provides an in depth analysis of several areas relative to the study of minority writers juxtaposed to the effects of canonization and the twins wrought through post-colonialism: colonization and decolonization. Within the introduction, Deena notes: "Colonial

and postcolonial problems are the most urgent matters of concern that are confronting the world today" (5). In agreement, this work makes a similar investigation while targeting African American female writers specifically. It was, after all, the notation of Deena questioning the placement of the ethnic woman in society behind that of man that became the crux of this research. Deena explains that his book is "a bridge". Likewise, this research seeks to act as a complement. Although it is not a bridge itself, it seeks to act as a buttress to many of the arguments posed by Deena.

This research relies on discussion of four central figures within the sphere of African American Literature. The first of those is Phillis Wheatley. Phillis Wheatley, the seminal author is discussed in the book *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* by Henry Louis Gates Jr. The book is important as it reveals important critical views of the writer as well as the controversy surrounding her acclamations. In the book's preface, Gates notes that his work is an attempt to "recuperate Phillis Wheatley, the first African poet in English, from the long Shadow of Jefferson's (Thomas) misgivings about her gifts" (3). It may be probable to note Jefferson's disdain of Wheatley's poetry due to abolitionists' arguments that African American literature proved the capabilities of the "Negro". The earliest African American female author was thus plagued by criticism of the colonizing white male; furthermore, criticism of her work would begin a continual trend with other minority female writers.

In her article, “Something Rogue: Commensurability, Commodification, Crime, and Justice”, Megan Sweeney discusses the works of writer, Toni Morrison, and her visitation of the African American narrative. Sweeney discusses Morrison’s narratives as stories that are both African and American and their method of encompassing the basic ideas of American wealth, power, pursuit of happiness, family, and love. Sweeney’s central argument is evidenced by her proclamation that Morrison’s use of narrative allows a deeper exploration of the American experience. Consequently, it is the experience of African American women, in particular, which helps define the parameters of the specific challenges within a postcolonial society. Furthermore, it is these experiences that have outlined the identity of the black woman in modern society.

A discourse of the struggles of African American women exists in axis with discourse of the formation of black female identity. Specifically, it is difficult to provide ideas relative to one’s struggles if there is no declaration of the processes involved in the creation of identity. Carol King’s “The Impact of Race, Gender and Class on Identity in Toni Morrison’s Fiction” attempts to declare specific peculiarities relevant to identity formation as expressed through the writings of Morrison. King notes: “loathing blacks in Morrison’s novels have learned to see the world through white eyes” (201). King’s documentation here plots many of the subtleties existent not only in Morrison’s work but also those of the other African American female writers.

Another writer who discusses Toni Morrison is Jane Forress Bennett. Bennett emphasizes Morrison's presence in writing and its role in helping to reshape the established canon. Her article, "Changing the Face of Literature" references several of Morrison's works and their ability to relate the history of America. Bennett notes that it may be questionable to declare that the experience of African Americans is universally an American experience. Contrarily, one cannot ignore the ability of writings by Morrison and others to "reveal history anew" (79). This presented research by design attempts to explore a noted history as clarified by African American women. Additionally, it is through such examinations whereupon one truly recognizes alternative viewings of literature, views that may otherwise be ignored.

Toni Morrison has become a quintessential figure within the discussion of the African American experience. In her article, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" she reasserts the existence of specific features that sets literature by African Americans apart from that of others. Morrison declares: "There is something called American literature that, according to conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian literature... It is somehow separate from them and they from it" (1). Morrison goes on to discuss multiple intrinsic properties relative to the established literary canon and the exclusion of African American literature within it.

Alice Walker, like Toni Morrison has used her writing as a platform to champion the causes of all women. She has maintained a very vocal stance in her candid revelation of the silencing and marginalization of the ethnic woman within a postcolonial society. Mary Helen Washington's "An Essay on Alice Walker" seeks to explain the reasoning behind Walker's writings. It also explains her vision of the multiple experiences of black women "as a series of movements from women totally victimized by society" (39). As victims, Washington heralds the female characters in Walker's writings as using the interior of their souls to deal with the universal problems of poverty, exploitation, and discrimination. Washington's discussion reveals a new reading of Walker's works, whereupon one studies directly the victimized African American woman.

Lauren Berlant's reading of *The Color Purple* as expressed by " Race Gender and Nation in *The Color Purple*" analyzes Walker's depiction of the African American woman and her attempt to depict the problem with patriarchal formation of nationalism and its ability to neglect African American women. African American women are, once again, discussed in relation to their status below that of white men, white women, and black men within the structures established by colonialism. Berlant's article specifically provides an example of Walker's characters and their ability to exemplify the struggle between the African American woman and imperialism.

Other readings of Walker's works agree that there are multiple idiosyncrasies within writings by African American women which depict their lives.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his article, “Color Me Zora” communicates the ability of the novel *The Color Purple* to define what he describes as a powerful example of “the black quest to make the text speak” (240). In a sense, it is Gates who affirms the existence of “speaking” works such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God;* furthermore, his article declares that *The Color* Purple*’s* use of the epistolary form is in fact a response to Hurston. It is with dialect and language that Walker’s characters deal with the existence of a double consciousness, which pervades the existence of minorities in a postcolonial society. Gates’ work here bestows upon the reader another way in which to interpret the text: looking beyond the situational challenges of the characters, while looking toward the societal implications within.

The power of a piece of literature to reveal through a fiction based story, the truth of nonfiction, reaffirms the position behind this presented research. That is, literature provides a doorway into the very real experiences depicted in fictitious works. Lending her voice toward Zora Neale Hurston, Mary Helen Washington offers a contrary reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in another of her articles “I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands: Emergent Female Hero”. Washington begins by immediately noting the usual association of Hurston’s novel and its supposed expression of “female power” (98). Furthermore, Washington reveals that what may be viewed as expression of power is false. According to her article, the central character of the work, Janie, is not the powerful force one usually assumes her to be; instead,

Janie is like any other African American woman within a postcolonial society. Her existence is marginalized; her voice silenced as juxtaposed to the presence of the black male. Washington's reading of the novel leads one to revisit similar works, and more appropriately, works which express the power of woman, which begs the question: Do these works truly reveal the existence of female power?

The discussion of struggles between African American female writers and the effects of imperialism, canonization, and sexism correlates in part with discussions of the study of ethnic literature in general. Often it has been the debate of many critics that ethnic literature cannot be studied in the same way that literature that is not classified as "ethnic" is studied. Consequently, this study hinges on the proposal that there are differences inherent to ethnic literature, specifically African American literature. The article, "Criticism of Ethnic Literature: Seeing the Whole Story" offers John Reilly's perception of ethnic literature. He proposes an expanded study of ethnic literature in general, one that moves beyond "reducing literature to social documentation". In other words, remaining knowledgeable of the specific intricacies attributable to specific ethnic groups while also remembering to acknowledge the shared attributes. This is key to the examination of African American women's writings and their specific struggles. It thus allows one to rethink the normal strategy of seeing the ethnic experience as exclusive; instead realizing there may be elements that would make them inclusive.

The article, “Generic Multiculturalism: Hybrid texts, cultural contexts” concurs with Reilly’s claims as it proposes that one look beyond the simplistic method of studying ethnic literature as radically opposite of non-ethnic works, which are bound within the confines of the established literary canon. Laura Behling’s stance here offers the idea of the existence of “hybrid genres”, which are themselves relative to “hybrid identity”. In a sense, individuals within a postcolonial system have a greater opportunity to develop a sense of identity that encompasses traits of their superior oppressors and their inferior counterparts. Likewise, these qualities find their way into literary works written by those considered “inferior” and can shape the way in which the works may be perceived. Her argument proposes one to realize the hybrid nature of texts, especially those written and classified as ethnic. Thus a work may be discussed on the basis of all the things that lead to its creation whether they were of the oppressor or of the inferior.

The nature of a text is important when considering its inclusion or exclusion within the established literary canon. Evidently there is a continuing discussion pertaining to both the traditional literary canon and African American literature. However, what happens when a work’s credibility hinges on not only the ethnicity of the writer, but on their sex as well? Barbara Frey Waxman’s article, “Canonicity and Black American Literature: A Feminist View” cites the difficulty in maintaining a relevant literary canon when all views of that canon are dogmatically formed; that is, noting that it is impossible to cite the literary canon

as established. Waxman continues the argument that the literary canon should be adept to continual change. A part of this change according to Waxman is the inclusion of more African American literature, especially that of women.

The make-up of the literary canon remains a point of debate, yet, how should criticism of the canon be used? Joyce A. Joyce contends in her article "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism" that good criticism must move away from the past "polemical" method of black literary criticism as that it has proved unsuccessful; instead, a new movement must take place whereupon new ideas are brought to the surface "to give them force in order to affect, to guide to animate, and to arouse the minds and emotions of Black people" (343). Joyce questions the role and responsibility of the literary critic in order to prove his/her effectiveness in truly accentuating the ethnic canon.

Proponents on both sides are often adamant in their charge to direct the literary canon. The protectors attempt to protect and the revolutionaries like Waxman attempt to revolutionize it. Like Waxman, Marianne Whelchel is a revolutionary who explains that the multiple peculiarities within African American literature are essential to the literary canon. Within such works, Whelchel cites their ability to reshape the general notions surrounding ethnic literature in general; their ability to "fill the gaps" (588).

The use of African American writings creates an often unrealized problem within the sphere of literary criticism. Writers Patricia Sharpe, Frances E.

Mascia-Lees, and Colleen B. Cohen shed provide information about the inability of white women and black men to respond appropriately to texts written by women. Their cumulative work "White Women and Black Men: Differential Responses to Reading Black Women's Texts" analyzes this problem while making a notion toward the need of an established black feminism. At the root of their argument is realization that the myopic stance toward the study of literature written by black women leads to a misunderstanding on one hand and a misrepresentation on the other. The white female critic, according to their research, is at times ignorant to the distinguishing factors within black female writings. Men, on the other hand, are men. They cannot know what it means to be female. Therefore, their one sided stance of authority, places their criticism in the realm of sexism.

Continuing the discussion of women and literature, Estelle B. Freedman's work *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* qualifies as an essential piece as it pulls together a relevant history of feminism. Her research calls into question the relevancy of the term itself while using its historical development to present incarnation as a method for displaying its true power. Most importantly perhaps is Freedman's historical account, which confirms exclusionary practices within feminist theory that neglected women of color. This is important as that it provides critical documentation, which helps to support the call of this research toward the development of a new multicultural feminist theory. That is, the original or old feminist theory is not sufficient or

supportive in all spheres relative to the experiences of women of color; more appropriately, African American women.

The usual deliberation within the sphere of feminism usually pulls from literature in an attempt to cite evidence contained there; however, Angela Y. Davis offers a different vision of feminism, more appropriately, black feminism. Her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,* scrutinizes the, at times, one sided nature of black feminism, which in part includes only African American women of a particular societal stature, while excluding the poor and disadvantaged. Furthermore, it reveals the existence of other realms whereupon the black female voice can be heard, literally. Davis uses the lyrics of key blues singers to conduct an innovative study of African American feminism, citing the wealth of knowledge within those songs and their "expressions of feminist consciousness". Works like Davis' encourage one to explore beyond the scope of literature to truly devise a new ethnically branded feminism.

An arc within the discussion proposed by this research wishes to introduce information relative to the manifestation of a new multicultural feminism. For its credit, multiculturalism and theories that concur with it seem to be derived of the promise to promote healthy inclusion; furthermore, its scope would seek to give voice to the silenced, stature to the marginalized, and thoughts of concern for the neglected. Conversely, Amaryll Chanady's "From Difference to Exclusion: Multiculturalism and Post colonialism" offers a contradictory view of multiculturalism. Instead of being successful in its attempts to provide inclusion,

Chanady argues that multiculturalist practices only further exclude the individuals and groups it is designed to benefit. Chanady's declaration of the ambiguous nature of multiculturalism offers a perfect point of contrast with the overwhelming consensus of approval for multiculturalist thought.

Imperialism, Canonization, & Sexism Defined

A topic of this magnitude relies heavily upon the meanings of derringer terms, phrases, and multiple theories; therefore, it is pertinent to identify key definitions for the three areas relevant to this specific discourse. As noted herein, each term will be discussed, refuted, compared, quantified, or qualified within the limits of the definition given for its use in this presented research. For that reason, it will not prove sufficient to attempt to direct discourse outside of the limits set by the chosen definitions.

Beginning first with imperialism, which according to 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). More appropriately, imperialism is a direct product of Colonization. Within the framework of imperialism, exists the basis of racial inequalities as predicated by the colonizer. Although progress has and continues to occur, one cannot overlook the existence of imperialistic views of race and their lingering presence within a postcolonial setting. Attitudes relative to racial and gender inequalities stand as one of the opponents facing writers who also happen to be women of color.

Canonization on the other hand deals directly with the establishment of the traditional literary canon. There exists a continuing battle to preserve 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 also 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 African American Literary History: Reconstructing the Canon” Sarah Corse and Monica Griffin discuss, briefly, the old, traditional methods of canonization whereupon 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 included within the canon. Women of color must, therefore, fend off the threat of canonization, and the likelihood that the inclusion of their writings will cause them to fall victim to possible deconstruction by avid protectors of the traditional literary canon.

The craftiest of all opponents women writers of color will take on is sexism. Sexism is simply the tension created by ideological complexities of male dominance over their female counterparts. Within direct correlation with the traditional literary canon, the place of the female writer has continually been questioned. Works by women of color are also heavily scrutinized if they tend to portray men in a negative light.

In an Interview with Alice Walker, Esther Ivereem discusses this problem for women writers of color, especially those of African American descent: Books by authors including Terri McMillan, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Walker... [whose works] included less-than-shining examples of Black manhood. Who can forget trifling Franklin in McMillan's, *Disappearing Acts*? Or the buzzard Luther Nedeed in Naylor's *Linden Hills*? (seekingblack.com). Women of color cannot retell situations between themselves and men without receiving criticism that denounces the positive things in their work in favor of highlighting the negative portrayal of men. It is therefore logical that works written by women of color reference the female struggle against sexism. After all, the writers themselves have lived and witnessed these experiences.

Chapter III

The Battle Against Imperialism, Canonization & Sexism

Phillis Wheatley

To begin a discussion of the plight of African 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. Wheatley, whose reputation is only hindered by the sheer amount of criticism her work acquired upon its release acted as a precursor for what other women like her could expect. Furthermore, her life as a writer sheds light on the duality of literature by women of color. That is, the writing must be expressive and combative.

The preface of Phillis Wheatley's collection states: "The following Poems were written originally for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the products of her leisure Moments... As her Attempts in Poetry are now sent into the World, it is hoped the Critic will not severely censure their Defects". The preface goes on to humbly provide reasoning behind the creation of the collection and asks the reader to accept the collection with the understanding that the writer in question does not forward her writing as anything more than the leisurely productions of a young girl; however, Wheatley's writing would go on to provide proof of the African American's ability to handle the art of poetry. According to the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* offers its reader several introductory documents

designed to authenticate Phillis Wheatley and her poetry" (Gates & McKay 214). Her writings became the method by which the masses learned to gauge 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.

One of Wheatley's greatest critics would surface in Thomas Jefferson who is noted for stating: "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis [sic] Wheatley [sic] but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (Grimes). Jefferson is highly regarded for his outspoken criticism of Africans in America. For Jefferson, it was incomprehensible that Wheatley could genuinely furbish writings of meaning. In fact, her writings, though genuine, were nothing more than "mindless repetition and imitation, without being the product of intellect, of reflection" (Gates 45). Jefferson's disdain of Wheatley's poetry is likely due to abolitionists' arguments that African American Literature provided proof of the capability of the "Negro". Thus, the "Negro", capable of mastering the arts, could be worth more than a simple laborer. Jefferson's thoughts alluded to the inferiority of the African mind and thus the inferiority of Wheatley and other slaves. Therefore, if one is to consider this, it is not so hard to realize that the general thoughts of this nature have been embedded into cultural thought pertaining to blacks or "Negroes".

Furthermore, black women are targeted 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).

Prolific African American writer Richard Wright, as quoted by Deena, places blame on Wheatley for "being at one with white culture" (Qtd. in Deena 20). Long regarded for his outspokenness, Wright dismisses Wheatley's writings on the basis of her close relationships with whites; furthermore, he denounces the accreditation given to them. Thus, Wright falls in place alongside critics who denounce the writings of an individual due to their relationships with the racially other. One may consider this notion of Wright to be universal, that is, he would make the same claim if the writer were male. However, when speaking of another slave poet George Moses Horton, Wright, according to Deena "forgives George Moses Horton for being a split man, trapped in a culture" (20). Strange it seems that Horton is trapped while Wheatley is simply "at one". They are, after all, both slaves whose writings were influenced and promoted by their white slave owners.

In her writings, Wheatley relies heavily upon her Christian faith. Her poems are filled with references that inspire as well as those which ask her readers to question their views relative to Africans. Perhaps it is Jefferson, or more appropriately those in agreement with him, that prompted Wheatley's writing of her poem "On being brought from Africa to America". The poem reminds us that despite the differences of Africans "Twas mercy that brought me from my pagan land" (line 1), there does exist a hope that they, too, may be considered acceptable in God's eye "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/ May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (lines 7-8). This mode of writing is a recurring theme for women of color through writing.

According to Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, writings by black women work to create "alternative social imaginaries that represent a space where home and belongingness may be attained and self-determination realized" (528). In their article "Subverting Forced Identities, Violent Acts and Narrativity of Race: A Diasporic Analysis of Black Women's Radical Subjectivity in Three Novel Acts" Gillman and Thomas discuss the act of subversion through literature composed by African American female writers. They go on to assert that black female writers use this technique to fight oppression; moreover, they are then better able to define a space within their society that is homelike: providing security and a sense of "belongingness" (Thomas & Gillman 529). Yet, women of color inadvertently expose themselves through this process; making themselves and their writings vulnerable to the attack.

In the case of Wheatley, the attack is forcefully strong. Wheatley's perception of the world and her predicament would have been quite rare. As a slave, she was seemingly unaffected by the harsh realities that many other Africans endured. Therefore, within her writing, one may note that there is not much literature which protests slavery. This has been considered by some, like Wright, as the crux upon which her work should be measured. However, as noted by Anne Applegate in her article "Phillis Wheatley: Her Critics and her Contribution", Wheatley was "the first Black American woman author to receive any recognition in the literary world. Unfortunately, she is too often remembered simply as an oddity" (125). Besides the criticism of her works, does the content, alone, provide Wheatley's legacy protection? Does the content merit inclusion in the traditional literary canon? Are they "ethnic" enough to obtain acceptance from others of her race? The aforementioned questions relating to Wheatley are questions, which may be examined with any female writer of color.

The female writer of color must be ready at all times to defend or even substantiate her work. Unlike works provided by men, there is always a lingering question behind the actions of women. The ambiguity that surrounded the release of Wheatley's writings is seemingly founded on the disbelief that a slave could not produce writings of interest; however, if one forgets for a moment that the writer is a slave, the only qualifying problem is rooted in the writer's sex. As evidence, look toward the declaration signed by Wheatley's supporters who express the following: "We whose Names are the under-written, do assure the

World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl" (To the Publik). Although Phillis Wheatley was the first African in America to have published writing, it would not keep others from questioning the writings of other Africans. However, there does not appear to be a mass of objections to the writings of other slave writers such as Equiano, Venture Smith, or Jupiter Hammon. Yet one must remember that the aforementioned writers are all men. They may have been Africans, or African American slaves; however, their writing is afforded the male stamp of approval. Wheatley, by luck of nature, is unfortunately a woman.

Therefore, due in part to the influences that helped shape her writing, Wheatley would be cast as an impostor, a poser to what was considered a true African American writer. Women of color more often than their male counterparts, walk a fine line. If their works lean too closely to their ethnic heritage their works are simply race writings, far removed from the traditional canon. On the other hand, if their works stand closer to the traditional (white) canon, then they have turned their backs on their culture.

Zora Neale Hurston

The writings of Zora Neale Hurston are as diverse as they are quintessential in understanding the relationship between literature composed by women of color and the world. Of herself, 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 defined by the idea that a black woman could demand a space in the world; furthermore, she asserts that the woman did not have to do so in fear of her race or femininity.

In perhaps her greatest literary accomplishment, 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 central character, Janie is told an important lesson about the life of women by her grandmother, "So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is the mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston *Eyes* 14).

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. According to the narrator: "women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (Hurston *Eyes* 1). Through the life experiences of the protagonist Janie, one is able to view directly the life of the African American woman: the mule of the world.

In his article, "Reading Hurston Writing" John Laudun examines the "various registers, or dimensions, in which images and acts of blurring or fusing occur" (46). His views offer a method for reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

which go further in detailing Hurston's very different African American experiences juxtaposed to that of a male. Laudun highlights the journey of the book's heroine as written purposely to reveal the very real differences between the African American woman and the Caucasian male, and the differences between the black woman and African American male.

Hurston's novel most certainly is best discussed when one notes the protagonist's goal to achieve natural harmony in her life; harmony she witnesses as a teenager while watching bee's pollinate fruit blossoms. This achievement of harmony is perhaps the central focus of the work, as that Janie's actions from that moment are an effort to achieve that level of harmony. Janie's journey takes her through two failed marriages, abuse, societal shame, and eventual happiness in a final marriage. By the work's end, we find that Janie has come full circle. She has achieved her oneness with nature and gained her own command of the far off horizon; her destiny "[pulling] it from around the waist of the world and [draping it] around her shoulders" (Hurston *Eyes* 193).

The life of Janie Crawford is a triumph. It indicates the indomitable spirit of the African American woman to survive. Priscilla Wald, in her article " Colored: 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 African 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 doubly indemnified by the problematic effects of post-colonialism.

At the time of its original publication, Hurston's work became the center of an ambiguous debate. On one side were supporters, albeit 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 battling against imperialistic ideals associated with race and culture as well as with sexist views of black men. In reference to the writings of Hurston, prolific African American author Richard Wright is quoted for stating: "[Hurston's novel] neither has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to a significant interpretation" (qtd. in Martinez). Wright's comments are ratified by other African American critics who disregard Hurston's novel due to its sensual overtones as well as her emphasis on southern dialect. For all that he criticizes of Hurston, Wright fails to create a proper portrayal of the black woman in any of his writings. Take for instance Wright's Black Boy. The representations of females in that work are all subordinate. The women are intellectually, physically, and psychologically inferior to men.

According to scholars Helen Neville and Jennifer Hamer, their article "We Make Freedom: An Exploration of Revolutionary Black Feminism", women of color, but more appropriately black women, "are oppressed on multiple interlocking levels" (437). If one is to reference only Hurston, he or she will surely find proof of these varying levels of oppression. Examine the work itself,

and one finds the story of an oppressed woman seeking her own voice in the world. Examine the author and we find that same story. It is no coincidence thus that the works of women of color are in part their attempts to dictate a personal space based on their real experiences in the world.

Janie's attempt to find voice has inspired numerous other females to find their own voices. It is perhaps because of Janie that we eventually were given Celie, whose journey continued the discussion began in Hurston's work, and sought to inspire an entirely new generation of women.

Alice Walker

Alice Walker's The Color Purple has been praised 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). Yet, there is something deeper at work in Walker's novel that represents the real life displacement of women in regards to society.

The prominent female characters in Walker's work act as caricatures of women in society. Celie, the protagonist, is the young woman who comes of age in a world that resigns her as a subordinate to men, frames her as physically

unattractive, and places her within a world that constantly reminds her that as a woman she is nothing. Through her experiences with the other women in the novel, who like Celie are themselves caricatures, she pieces together her own feminine identity within a largely male dominated world. Celie reveals the ugly, but very real existence of male bigotry.

She also reveals conflicting ideas pertaining to Christian images of god: "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (Walker *Color* 195). It is Celie who learns to think outside the prescribed notions dictated by man and to seek god in everything. However, one the single caricature of Celie alone.

Take for instance the indomitable Sophia. The caricature of Sophia is illustrated by her own admittance that she, along with her sisters, were all built like "Amazons". Celie describes Sophia after having her first baby by noting in her letter: "she still a big strong girl. Arms got muscle. Legs, too" (Walker *Color* 41). Whereas Celie represents the woman beaten down by the world, Sophia is the exact opposite. When she wishes to make a statement, she does. If a moment causes her to resort to physical action, she returns it in kind. Key to the character is her declaration that reminds us "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy, I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker *Color* 46). The "Amazon" as characterized by Sophia is fully knowledgeable of the place of the woman in the world and her need of strength to fight against the tyranny of the

world, especially that wrought by men in their own community. Celie and Sophia are not the only caricatures presented in the text.

After all, it is Shug Avery, the common county whore, who exemplifies the free-spirit that others have attempted to cage. Shug, like Sophia, speaks her mind and enjoys the pleasures of passion and sexual relations, and while she is no different from many of the men who swoon after her, she is depicted as nothing more than a harlot. Consequently it is Squeak, so named for her meek voice, who cannot demand the simple respect of having others call her by her real name. She is but a woman in a man's world; she cannot declare her own identity. Celie's sister, Nettie, although educated, falls in conflict with the African villagers because she wishes to change the social order by educating the females. Nettie is quickly reprimanded and put back in her place. Walker's stance here is essential in revealing the parallels between the fictitious characters in her novel and the indubitable existence of real women of color.

Mary Helen Washington's readings of Walker's works reveals 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 exceed those of woman; man dictates and the woman must obey.

Linda Abbandonato discusses the novel stating: "in her representation of the unrepresentable, Walker dares us to arrive at the place where imagination is too far to go" (306). The charge of any writer is to take the reader somewhere; however, the destination depends as much on the ethnicity of the writer as his or her gender. Walker forces the reader, male and female, 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 framed 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 combating the rural south. The narrative expressed 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 reveals specifically the stress of imperialism on black men, and its greater effects on black women. The characters Ruth, Margaret, Mem, and Josie indicate a society whereupon 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, canonization-do have adverse effects on women" (17). Walker's work illustrates the black male enforcement of power derived from an inability to exert authority anywhere else within a postcolonial setting. The character Brownfield is important here, as his despair leads to his attempt to give his wife the treatment the world had given to him. Brownfield is described as man who has given up within a world that has trampled him: "He felt himself destined to become no more than overseer, on the with man's plantation, of his own children" (Walker *Third* 72). In retaliation, Brownfield seeks vengeance by destroying his wife "His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from schoolteaching" (Walker *Third* 73). For Brownfield, Mem, once the love of his life, is a reminder of his destitute situation. He is no longer a man when juxtaposed to Mem. Brownfield understands that his wife's "knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write" (Walker *Third* 73). Brownfield attacks his wife, forces her "into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down" (Walker *Third* 73). Here, Walker reminds us of a common situation experienced by black women. 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. Therefore, women of color discovered that they would be victims to their oppressors and their own men.

Mem learned that she would be victim to her husband, who blamed everything on his wife. Mem is forced to deal with the problems of her husband as well as her own. Strangely, the greatest problem presented by Mem to Brownfield was "her greater knowledge... It put her closer in power, to them" (Walker *Third* 73). Mem represents the woman of color, whose threat to her race and fellow black man, is partly her fault. Walker does not end her illustration with the character Mem instead, she chooses to use other female characters to further explicate upon the very real situations of women. The characters of Josie and Margaret are also examples of the female's marginalized role within the male-dominated postcolonial setting.

Through Josie, Walker creates another female character who reveals her dependence on the authoritative male. Josie spends her life waiting on Grange, the only man she felt loved her. Her life is spent in attempt to procure love. Perhaps, Josie's problems stem from her poor relationship with her father who "rode" her while she slept every night. Josie is tormented by her father's disapproval and oppression; however, the oppressive nature of her father does not cause her to stop loving him. The colonized woman, of course, has nowhere else to turn except to her man, and she returns to him even when he stifles her

very existence. The stifling of the feminine presence is easily examined by looking towards Grange's first wife, Margaret.

Grange's first wife, Margaret was loyal to her husband until she could no longer remain idle against his affairs and physical abuse. Margaret is the quintessential marginalized woman, who is eventually destroyed by the colonial onslaught of neglect and depression. With seemingly no alternative, Margaret allows herself to become a whore. Most importantly, she succumbs to self-destruction due to an inability to be with her husband. Again, the image here reveals the problematic situation of the black woman, loyal to her black man whose concerns may not always include the whims of a woman.

The writings of Alice Walker continue to provide us with the opportunity to discuss the situation of women of color, more appropriately black women. As evidenced by her writings, the experiences of the characters in her works are indicative of the realistic world inhabited by black women. Unfortunately, it is a world that many can only view from the outside thus, they are incapable of fully understanding what it means for these women. Characters like Shug Avery, Celie, Margaret, Mem, Sophia and the like are quintessential literary characters; their job falls in line beside Hurston's character Nanny who reminds her granddaughter of the black woman's role as mule. On the backs of these characters we find strapped the indigenous loads created by a post-colonial society.

Toni Morrison

Morrison's essay "Thoughts on the African-American Novel" discusses specifically the role of the novel within the African American community. Accordingly, Morrison describes the novel as a product produced for the middle class. 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. Furthermore, it would not be as refined as the art or fine antiques of the aristocracy. The novel became a success because of its ability to not only teach proper protocols to a burgeoning 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). One would likely agree that Morrison has been successful in making that connection. There are numerous works for which Morrison is known. There are also multiple experiences conveyed through her writings, primarily those of African American women.

For many, Toni Morrison is known as the African American laureate who transposed the delicately 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 African American female writers who use their writings to formulate a space that has been denied to them by society.

Toni Morisson's seminal 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. It is through the character Sethe, a former slave, that one learns of one of the major hardships created by slavery. Essentially this is a hardship that affects women with a ferocity unlike that of their male counterparts. The story of the runaway Sethe is further complicated by her choice to ensure that her children would not have to return to slavery when her former master finds her in hiding. Sethe uses the only method of control she has, that is, control over the lives of her children, and takes it upon herself to spare them from slavery through death. Fortunately, her attempt is foiled, but not before she is successful in murdering her oldest child, a girl whose headstone reads "Beloved". The "Beloved" one lives on however in spirit and dominates the house on I24, "the ghost that tried them so" (Morrison *Beloved* 4). It is not until the reappearance of a man in the house and a strange girl that helps one to understand the choices made by Sethe, and for that matter, the other slave women whose heritage is fashioned by colonization.

Sethe is Morrison's paradoxical character. She is also the quintessential female slave: appeasing the desires of her children; adhering to the governing

powers of her white masters. She is so loyal, in fact, that she receives a gift from the mistress of Sweet Home, “a present from the lady I worked for” (Morrison *Beloved* 58). Unfortunately, the life afforded to Sethe in Kentucky on the Sweet Home plantation is anything but “sweet”. A chance at freedom leads Sethe to strike out; however, she is unsuccessful at first and becomes the victim of a sexual assault by Sweet Home’s patriarchal power: Schoolteacher, and his boys. The men exact their will over the young slave woman and commit an act of theft that forever scars Sethe. Sethe recounts her experience, repeatedly saying: “those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it.” (Morrison *Beloved* 16). The mother’s breast, which bears milk, the gift of life, is the only thing which the poor slave woman can give to her children. It is a rare and precious gift that some slave women are not able to give their children because they are at times responsible for nursing the children of their owners. According to the power structure established by imperialism, the female slave, like her male counterpart, is a thing to be used. In this case, Sethe embodies a role that countless slave women were forced to take part in: one to amuse the master who wields complete power.

It is because of her understanding of this system that Sethe makes her way to freedom and asserts a level of power and authority that had been previously denied to her, and to an extent, her children. Sethe, on the precipice of destruction is able to bring herself back and begins life anew, free with Baby Suggs. Sethe’s new claim to freedom is short-lived when her former master and

rapists (Schoolteacher's boys) find her and desire to return her to the sugary Sweet Home. It is at this moment that Sethe takes her role as a free woman and essentially a mother to a new level. Sethe decides that her children will find more satisfaction in a freedom filled death rather than a freedom-less life. One may question the motive of the runaway slave woman, yet if one studies the ladder of authority designed with the Imperialist in mind, the slave woman has only power over her children. Furthermore, what little power she has is dictated last in her favor. Thus, Sethe attempts to free her children from the burden of slavery, forever increasing her burden as seemingly illustrated by the chokecherry tree that now "could have cherries" (Morrison *Beloved* 16). The tree itself is a reminder of her past difficulties; likely enhanced now with red cherries symbolizing the blood of her children. The discussion here of Sethe and her decisions provides evidence toward the explanation of the female grasp toward obtaining control where formerly she had none. Contrarily, this is a point noted by Satya P. Mohanty.

Satya P. Mohanty's research entitled "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition" takes into account this desire and need of Sethe to obtain a form of freedom. Mohanty explains: "For Sethe, freedom-even under slavery-appears as the ineliminable human need for self-determination...it is not enough to be free from legally imposed bondage; one must also claim ownership of one's freed self" (59). The notation of Mohanty helps to bring Sethe's world into clearer view. In her mind, the actions she took

are those born of love. Paul D replies simply: "Your love is too thick...what you did was wrong" (Morrison *Beloved* 165). For Paul D, a male, his understanding is quite different from that of the female slave. Although he too was once a slave, his understanding of the Imperialistic system of slavery is completely different from the understanding of Sethe. Paul D's inclusion in the text is pivotal in fully understanding the women characters of Sethe, Denver, and even the ghostly Beloved. After all, it is Paul D, the man, whose place within the Imperialistic structure is to maintain the black home; his power living over the women as that there is little else for which he can control.

Paul D enters the home on I24 to learn of its bewitched spirit. Denver is quick to inform him that the house is haunted, yet Paul D is unafraid, not even when the spirit attacks does he run. Instead he orders the unruly spirit: "God damn it! Hush up!" (Morrison *Beloved* 18). The spirit obliges and quiets down temporarily. The spirit remains at bay until the entrance of the ethereal Beloved. After performing his masculine duty of acquiring space and dominating it, Paul D finds that the mere presence of the girl Beloved is affecting him as well; he is unable to find peace. It is only when she forces herself upon him and makes him say her name that he is truly pushed over the proverbial edge. Beloved has entered a space wherein he had gained control and had wrenched it from him. This is psychologically destructive to Paul D. In his psychological study entitled *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses at length the role of perceptual being, as professed by ethnicity, race, and color; furthermore, he reasons many

possibilities in defining the lived experiences of black men throughout the world. The case of Paul D seems quite similar to a situation that Fanon explains in discussing the black man's acquisition of space. Thus he "will not have to experience his being for others" (Fanon 89). In a sense, Paul D entered the home at I24 and was free to gain control because, at the time there was nothing there to combat his dominance or to cause him to consider any notion of inferiority. However, this changes as Beloved acquires power in the home, in turn causing Paul D to question his place, his stature, which manifests in the form of his uneasiness in the house. Paul D thus uses the past actions of Sethe, deemed inexcusable to open the door for his exit. It is after his exit that one learns more of the character Paul D and his time spent as a slave.

Paul D's experience as a slave within a postcolonial setting shapes his identity as a black man. His work on the chain gang combined with his other experiences as simply a slave have created a black man in the image designed by imperialism. Thus, the wandering field hand is lost until he finds a place to control and upon losing that, he himself is lost. He is the former male slave whose worth is less than nothing. This contention is made as Paul D recollects his past and remembers the day he learns of his true worth: "The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future" (Morrison *Beloved* 226). Going back to Fanon, it is important here to note the sudden trauma Paul D experiences as he is shocked into the reality of learning his true place in the world as well as his worth, a worth that was likely less than Sethe.

Sethe was “property that reproduced itself without cost...her price was greater than his” (Morrison *Beloved* 226). Fanon notes that reality for the black man “proves extremely tough”; furthermore, he expresses the reality that upon becoming traumatized by this awakening that “he then begins his real apprenticeship” (128). Through Paul D one gains a greater perception of the male-female relationship of slavery.

The male must hold power over the woman which he controls. Yet she is the jewel, worth more than the man who holds power over her. Thus, psychologically there is a rift created by the Imperialist design of worth pertaining to African American slaves. It is a rift that Morrison hints to here, yet there are existent traces of it in the writings of other African Americans, specifically African American women. Paul D cannot handle the reality exposed by his traumatic awakening. He says to Stamp Paid: “How much is a nigger supposed to take?” (Morrison *Beloved* 235). In this statement, the understanding of life for the African American male is brought into full view. The male can only take so much. He is a beast of burden. He has been broken down, whipped, controlled, yet he is still the one who must control his black woman. Thus it makes sense that there are numerous excuses for the male characters like Paul D, Stamp, or even Halle, who, according to Paul D, likely went mad after witnessing the rape of his wife. Whereas he had simply gone mad, Sethe is just wrong and her act of love according to Paul D is simply wrong. It is Paul D’s inability to understand the plight of Sethe and the choice that she made which reveals not only his true

character, but the view of the black woman in this case, Sethe, through the eyes of the black man. For the woman, there is no room for mistakes or madness. Instead there is only right or wrong; black or white. Hence, it precariously places the woman into a corner. At this point she must make the difficult decisions under a scrutinizing eye of other people. Sethe's love may have been too thick according to Paul D, and she likely could have made another choice but the question remains: Where was her husband? What is his responsibility here? It's okay, however, because he had likely fallen into a state of insanity which provides him protection. Ironically Sethe's insanity is not declared. It also does not provide her protection.

It is this understanding of Paul D, the male character, that helps one to better understand Sethe. The two are linked due to the creation of their relationship through slavery. The system was designed to strip dignity and any form of authority from the slaves thus, it is the sense of helplessness and powerlessness that creates widespread fear among the slaves, fear that any act against their oppressors would end in severe punishment. Of these acts, rape is included. The rape of Sethe is indicative of one of the "rights" slave owners. The oppressor's authority to control extends to his slave women as well. They are his property and may be used at his discretion. This would include serving, working in the fields, bearing children for sale, or for recreational purposes. Rapes of this type are documented throughout the Slave Narratives conducted through the Federal Writers Project. One such account comes from a male, Ishrael Massie,

who explains: “Lord chile, dat wuz common. Marsters an' overseers use to make slaves dat wuz wid deir husbands git up, do as dey say... Den he gits in bed wid slave himself... What we saw, couldn't do nothing 'bout it” (Qtd. in Gates, “Voices”). This prostration of the black male slave by the system of slavery (a product of imperialism) may therefore provide reason for Halle’s bout of dementia and Sethe’s later attempt to provide freedom for her children through death. Sethe and Halle’s state of mind as well as Paul D’s struggle to obtain a sense of worthiness are Morrison’s relation of the slave experience, an experience created by imperialism.

Another of Morrison’s works, *Song of Solomon*, reveals the attempt of a young man to find his place. This bildungsroman of sorts is primarily a narrative of a young male; however, through his narrative, one is able to glimpse the narratives of the women in his life, primarily his mother Ruth and aunt, Pilate. What power is there within these narratives? One may question that a story within a story is nothing more than a contextual pattern used by the author for the sake of style. It is a tool used to set the work apart. However, it is impossible to deny the ability of these stories as they bridge the gap between the writer and the reader. These stories create a common ground upon which the reader gains accessibility to the author’s thoughts. According to Theodore Mason, Jr., these stories within stories or “narratives” may be categorized in one of three ways “those that enhance reality, those that seek to control reality, those that try to substitute for reality, and those that mirror reality” (176).

Ruth is the matron of the Dead family. There is much ambiguity pertaining to her seemingly inappropriate relationship with her late father and son as well as her apparent distance with her husband, Macon Senior; not to mention, her obvious hold to the past. Yet, there is another narrative here. There is quite possibly something amiss in the world of Ruth Dead who “places herself in the midst of a story which 'clarifies' her present life” (Mason 177).

Mason discusses the table in the Dead’s dining room. He notes that the spot on the table is a “visible token of continuity and regularity” (176). One may immediately identify that Ruth is perhaps comforted by the sign reminding her of the past with her father and yet, within this enhanced story of reality where a woman reminisces on her beautiful family of yesterday, I, like Mason, begin to think contrarily. Does the symbol truly represent a happy past? “The cloudy gray circle identified the place where the bowl filled every day during the doctor’s life with fresh flowers had stood…the water mark hidden by the bowl all these years was exposed (Morrison *Solomon* 13). The enhancement of Ruth ‘s story occurs in the form of her obsessive behavior and speculative actions noted by others in the text; however, there is something more to Ruth. Ruth’s supposed obsession with her husband and later her son may be the cause of her trapped presence. Perhaps, it is Ruth who is trapped between the past of comfort and a present of irrelevancy. Looking back at the table, it seems that Ruth is sad as she recounts the daily centerpiece and yet, there is something which tells me that the spot on the table is as much a burden. Therefore, Ruth’s narrative exists within the

enhancement of a story pertaining to middle class acculturation. We may automatically assume that Ruth is truly happy with things of the past in comparison with her current situation; however, we will find that just outside this thought, it is possible to see that Ruth's story may not be so black and white. Ruth Dead is simply stuck, caught between her thoughts of what her life used to be and her refusal to acknowledge the failures which permeate her present status.

The narratives of women like Ruth are a testimonial of the changes that occur when an individual obtains a higher societal level of status and the ever reaching power of imperialism. There are also motifs of sexism as brought forth through the character Macon Senior. Contrarily, it is the narrative of Macon Dead whose narrative seeks to control reality: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (Morrison *Solomon* 55). Macon Dead Sr.'s obsession with property and wealth is at its heart Macon's attempt to control his life the way his father couldn't. Like other male characters in Morrison's works, Macon Senior controls with an iron fist. Yet, it is not hard to understand Macon if one understands Paul D. One should also understand Ruth by understanding Sethe. The only elements which changed between the respective narratives of the aforementioned characters were time and money. Their fictitious existence reveals a change in setting as relegated by time and the difference in their status as relegated by the procurement of money. However, the truth remains that the men must control, most certainly their women

and the women find that they are trapped. Hence, Ruth's obsessive behaviors are not too different from those of Sethe who loved too much. Morrison does not rest on revealing two seemingly similar characters in Ruth and Sethe. The woman Pilate, sister of Macon Senior, reveals another side to the African American woman. Pilate's very existence seems to defy reality. She professes weakness and yet, she is strong. She professes a desire to have loved more people and yet, she had touched the lives of so many in such profound ways that she perhaps loved more than any other character in the work.

Pilate is an enigmatic character within the work. The earliest description of her reveals that she is not very beautiful. Before they ever meet, Milkman explains that "his sixth-grade schoolmates teased him" (Morrison *Solomon* 37). They teased him to the point where he believed that he was somehow responsible for "her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine" (Morrison *Solomon* 38). Yet, in his first encounter with the aunt he was forbidden to see, Milkman discovers something about his aunt. He discovers that despite all the aforementioned things being true, her eyes revealed that "there was something missing" (Morrison *Solomon* 38). What was it that was missing from Pilate's eyes? Perhaps he realized that despite all the negative things that should have brought Pilate's spirit down there was nothing of the sort revealed in her presence. Her manner of speaking, the way in which her actions are described make her seem almost enchanting, ethereal, divinely favored. Even here physical features, which include the lack of a navel, help to clarify her

uniqueness. I believe that her lack of a navel helps to quantify the mystery of Pilate. She reveals to Ruth the sordid life of her past where she was liked by all until they learned the secret of her lack of a navel. To many, it symbolized that her birth was unnatural; furthermore, it proposed that there may be more to her mystical nature than suspicion. Pilate seems to represent an extreme opposite of everything that pervades her life. She is estranged from her brother, yet their past, their history is so linked that it is nearly impossible for them to ever truly deny their connection from one another. She seems to exist alone with her daughter and granddaughter, yet her business is supported by multiple customers. The customers who buy the wine which she and her family makes joins them together. There is a relationship here. Pilate tells the man who beats her daughter that women “don’t have the strength you men got” (94). It is ironic that in her weakness as a woman, she is able to draw him from her daughter, have him listen, and then allow him to leave (in fear that is). Pilate is a force within the novel, a force that by comparison outshines that of her nephew.

The characters Pilate and Milkman are linked on many levels for instance, their unnatural births. Her mother died giving birth to her, while his mother tried to kill him before he was born. Pilate and Milkman are linked by the blood of their family as well as the incredible history it carries. The two are linked by his disturbing relationship to Hagar, a relationship that, in part, completes Pilate’s view of them as brothers and sisters. Most importantly, their relationship reveals the needs of both individuals. Milkman is naive and ignorant to the world around

him. Pilate is very observant and knowledgeable of life in general and the subtle things that comprise it. Milkman does not know how to fly. Pilate can fly without ever leaving the ground. By the end of the novel, it seems that both Pilate and Milkman learn what they must from one another. Milkman learns of flight and Pilate realizes "I wish I'd knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all" (Morrison, *Solomon* 336). Pilate realizes here that she had kept her self away from people most of her life. Milkman, on the other hand, knew many people, but loved even fewer. Pilate and Milkman are an incomplete pair who, by the end of the work, learn what they must from each other.

Pilate's narrative also seems to be an extreme amalgamation of both Sehte and Ruth's. Like both women, Pilate is stuck; however, Pilate's ability to maneuver allows her a level of freedom not shared by Ruth or Sethe. Her existence is like that of a chameleon; her presence shifting and changing with each need that presents itself. Brenda Marshall discusses the character Pilate in her article "The Gospel According to Pilate". Marshall explains that Pilate has a significant wealth of knowledge: "Pilate knows...people have predictable expectations of how other people should look and act, and pretty predictable reactions when the expected patterns are violated" (488). Marshall concludes that due to Pilate's inability to conform, she "learns to play the particular role required" (488). This skill that is perfected by Pilate is one which women, especially those of minority status, must at times use to navigate a world created under the male powers constructed by imperialism. The reason so many

individuals in the text are confused by Pilate is likely due to the fact that she is not like Ruth. Ruth's character falls easily in line with the design of imperialism while Pilate's only appears to. Pilate maintains control by her ability to choose when she will put on a show, something she does to save her nephew when he attempts to steal from her. Marshall reexamines the scene, declaring: "Guitar and Milkman are the ass and the colt tied, and Pilate is the one who goes to the station to loose them" (488). This ability of Pilate proves that there is power that may be wielded by a woman within an Imperialistic society; however, she must be careful with how she uses and displays it. After all, the acquisition of power is something one usually discusses in reference to men, yet women are not too unlike men in their quest to desire power.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a work which continues to proliferate the desire of the female to obtain 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 revelation 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 African

American girls express a pivotal 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. Unfortunately, their tale may not prove beneficial to learn the reasons why, as noted in the introduction: “but since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 6).

The how of the narratives of Claudia, Frieda, and most importantly Pecola are formed most certainly by the Imperialistic ideals pertaining to both race and gender. Tapping Khayati once again, one may agree that *The Bluest Eye* is partly a psychological race study. Khayati explains: “*The Bluest Eye* shows, in a manner reminiscent of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, how the epistemic violence of the Other is both outside and inside; it operates through the internalization of the self as other” (315). In this sense, the girls find that their identity is shaped not by how they view themselves, but how the world views them. Thus, everything that the girls know about themselves is completely negative. The world does not view them favorably. The truth remains that their identities are suppressed.

The suppression of the girls begins at home. At home they are children who should be seen and not heard. Claudia explains that adults never spoke to

her; they simply gave them “directions... They issue orders without providing information” (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 10). The children in this type of community are completely opposite from the family Morrison introduces to the reader with her excerpt of the narrative of Dick and Jane. Dick and Jane are best representative of the ideal, Imperialistic family who has been afforded every advantage; furthermore, their advantages create an existence apart from what children in poor black communities face. The beautiful house of Dick and Jane is not at all like the old, cold house where Frieda and Claudia live, nor is it like the decrepit dwelling of the Breedloves. If one is a product of their surroundings it should be easily apparent that these children will grow into adulthood with a different understanding of life: their capabilities, dreams, and aspirations will be stifled before they are ever developed. The girls prove this throughout the text as they reveal the difficulties associated with their normal day to day lives.

For Claudia and Frieda perhaps it is the conflict they feel within their home. At home no one listens or trusts them. They are children after all. It is also feasible to believe that a part of their struggle is derived from their race: they are black. Not only are they black, Claudia and Frieda have features that they consider ugly and apart from what society says is beautiful. Pecola shares this internalized conflict, a conflict that is worsened by the surroundings in which the children live. Everywhere they turn there is an obstacle. The obstacles present themselves in the forms of first their own families, their communities, and the world itself. Thus the children in their suppressed state turn inward to exact

revenge upon the only thing upon which they have power: themselves. Khayati explains this process begins when individuals of color begin to question "what is black in him/herself, and desires what belongs to the white person" (315). What do these children desire? Claudia and Frieda reveal their wants early in the text. Morrison sets the scene as the two girls watch their neighbor, Rosemary Villanucci, a white girl who has things that they do not have. Rosemary lives in a nice home above her father's cafe. They have a 1939 Buick. She has a level of authority afforded by her race and affluence. Thus, the girls stare at her in the opening scene, desiring to take her bread and butter as well as "wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the ownership that curls her chewing mouth" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 9). Rosemary exists as a reminder of what the two girls know they will never be; what they will never have. In order to cope, the girls do what they do best: self-loathe. A part of this process is revealed through their obsession with the the racial other as signified by their like and dislike of Shirley Temple. Frieda adores Shirley Temple while Claudia hates her not because of how she looks, but because of what she represents. Shirley Temple is the perfect object of adoration. Claudia attests that part of her dislike was also derived from her lack of maturity. She had not reached what she describes as "the turning point" in the development of her "psyche". She attests that upon reaching that level, as Frieda and Pecola had, she would be allowed to love Shirley Temple (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 19). One learns that, with time, Claudia would find delight in the model of Shirley Temple and the Imperialistic power she

represented. Her delight, however, would not be as desirous as Pecola's wish to have blue eyes.

Khayati explicates the predicament of Pecola Breedlove by noting: "Pecola's fantasy that her life would be worthwhile if only she could have blue eyes is an extreme example of the common delusions of other black women. confronted with the dominance of cultural stereotypes" (316). Pecola's fantasy moves a step past the adoration expressed by Claudia and Frieda and moves into a more dangerous realm. It is here that Pecola's level of self-hatred is amplified by the mere truth that she desires what she cannot have for it is not truly the blue eyes that she desires, but the life that the blue eyes will bring along with it. Her delusions of a peaceful life are born of the truths she associates with life for whites; the children are well kept, the mother and father are loving and caring; parents don't fight, for they "mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 46). Pecola is damaged. Her present existence is exacerbated by the destruction of her psyche by everything that society says is right. Consequently, one may understand the stifling of the black female psyche. Proof of this is further evidenced through the adult female characters in the text.

Despite the fact that characters such as Pauline are older and have supposedly reached the point wherein their adult psyches have fully developed, the novel reveals that their development has been stopped at some point causing them to remain stagnant. Although it seems that they have come to terms with

their existence as the racially other, black women within a society that has taught them to hate themselves find it difficult to un-learn what has been consciously and subconsciously inserted into their understanding of the world. For Pauline her goal may not include having blue eyes as her daughter wishes. No, she finds comfort in having order, structure, and cleanliness. Like Geraldine whom Morrison offers as a point of contrast, Pauline desires an orderly existence, orderly perhaps like that of the whites she works for. She also desires a good relationship like that between a white man and a white woman. She expresses her joy of watching films and seeing "white men taking such good care of they women... big clean houses... them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 123). Pauline, as a woman, is basically caught in the same predicament as her daughter. She identifies color in the world as existing at two separate poles that are "in perpetual conflict" (Fanon 27). If these poles are in constant conflict, how can one survive when this conflict exists within their very psychological construct of the world?

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. We find evidence of the former through Geraldine who pretends that she is better than other black women because she has created a tolerable existence within the construct of an

Imperialistic society; however, we find that despite what she has gained, she continues to strive to set herself apart from what makes her black or like those girls she abhors: those like Pecola Breedlove, the “black bitch” (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 92). There is also proof that a part of this psychological destruction is indemnified by the misogynistic thoughts of black females by black males.

Morrison relates the experience of the black female juxtaposed to the black male. We see that as children the little black boys who hate themselves express their hatred on black girls as a method for displacing the dissatisfaction they have with their own blackness. Take for example the chant the boys taunt Pecola with: “Black e mo Black e mo” (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 65). It would seem confusing that the boys would attempt to taunt Pecola with a chant about features they share; however, this seemingly sexist attitude is one that pervades the experienced lives of African Americans. The narrator notes: “They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred... and sucked it all up into one fiery cone of scorn” (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 65). Yet these boys who will one day become men are unlikely to change. Instead their taunting may shift to abuse; any method that will help them to hate that which reminds them that they, too, are black and apparently worthless. The boys are representative of what comes before one grows into adult black manhood and becomes like Cholly Breedlove. Cholly further proves that the male practice of self-hate is worsened by his attempt to exact revenge upon the cause of his trouble: the black woman.

Morrison allows us to see through Cholly that the mind of the black male will not allow itself to hate the oppressor. Cholly is left mentally scarred when he is forced to continue sexual intercourse by a group of armed white men. We learn that "His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess-that hating them would have consumed him" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 151). Cholly's inability to hate the oppressors surfaces in his ability to hate what he decided was the cause of the situation: the woman. This method of thought does not leave Cholly; instead it surfaces in the beating of his wife and the eventual rape of his daughter. Everything act of the woman, even her inability to be protected by the black man, was an affront to him. Before he rapes his daughter, Cholly comes to terms with his daughter's actions: her hunched back, her sadness, "her misery was an accusation" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 161). For the black male, everything is perhaps an accusation, a reminder of what he cannot do. Thus he is forced to remind her that he is powerful. He can act this out through mental domination or as noted here, physical domination.

It has been noted that Morrison's attempts through her novels is to make a connection between the literature and the reader. What then is the connection offered by works like *Beloved* or *The Bluest Eye*? Whereas Walker's quintessential female characters essentially act as caricatures for various women in society, it seems that Morrison's women are quite effective in their ability to connect specific periods and the existence of women during those periods to the reader. Pecola, Claudia, Frieda, Pilate, Sethe, are excellent figures that help one

to understand periodized existence for African American women. From slavery to the depression and even afterwards, the women of Morrison's works shed light on the female psyche; its attempted development as well as its stifling by both society and black men. Yet there is apparent connection between the periodized experiences of these characters and other black female characters expressed through other writings. Therefore, there is proof that the shared existences of these fictitious women are likened to those of the very real women who created them, women who essentially understand their role as a beast of burden.

Other Women of Color

Jumping across racial lines, the stories of Janie, Celie, and Sethe bear a disturbing resemblance to those of characters in works written by other women of color who are not African American. Strange it seems that these parallels exist despite the differences in race, history, cultural association, and socio-economic status. However it is not strange if one realizes how the effects of imperialism, canonization, and sexism have affected women, especially women of color.

Aruhdhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an interesting novel that outlines the subtle truths of life for Indian women, more appropriately, the lives of all women of color. The female character Ammu is Roy's representation of the Indian woman whose failure in marriage equals a failed existence for the woman. After all, a "Man-less woman", moreover, a woman in this predicament due to a divorce "had no position anywhere at all" (Roy 45). Though not focusing entirely on the single character of Ammu, Roy's work gives the reader an opportunity to

view which type of woman has no place in traditional Indian society. It also allows us to participate in what Mary Lugones describes as "world traveling": "[to] move in and out of various cultural spaces, often out of necessity" (Qtd. in Kanhai 126).

By moving in and out of these cultural spaces, we may better reflect upon the experiences of women of color as dictated in their literary works. Like Roy, Maxine Hong Kingston discusses the situation of the woman less favored by society. In her collection *The Warrior Woman: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Kingston describes in her first story "No Name Woman" the life of one of her father's sisters whose presence has been completely erased from the family "We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (3). Through Kingston's remembrance of the story she has been told by her mother, we learn that Asian culture does not respect women who cannot control their desires. Yet, there is a contrast to this type of woman as typified by Fa Mu Lan. When Kingston's mother tells her about a woman who defies custom and seeks revenge for her village by becoming the rebel leader, the narrator makes the story her own. Although the narrator's mother "said [she] would grow up a wife or a slave," she gave her "the song of a woman warrior. . . [She] would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). By internalizing the legend of such a strong woman, the narrator somewhat reconciles, or at least escapes, the contradictions in her own life. Fu Mu Lan comes to embody femininity, strength, and the power of words as Hong Kingston writes, "when I was naked, I was a strange human being indeed—words on my back and the baby large in

front," and this vision gives the narrator an alternative to the options she battles. Thus we find the first offer of choice for the narrator. As a girl she is offered a story teaching her that she could be a warrior woman or she could be like her lost aunt. The aunt who is made nameless, her existence forgotten, is an example of a cultural truth for Kingston. The aunt crosses a line that unfortunately, women must not dare to cross: "It is this perilous boundary between desire and materiality, a boundary... that the aunt crosses" (Outka 454).

Boundaries become important when discussing the novel *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai. The work illuminates very real boundaries which control the female within the patriarchal family structure; furthermore, one is able to learn of the peculiarities relating to the female valuation of worth as constructed by society. Desai's relation of the character Uma reveals that a daughter within the Indian family structure has a role to play. Furthermore, if she is unable to successfully meet the challenges presented by that role, she becomes a burden to her family. The familiarity of this situation may be striking, yet it shares numerous commonalities with the understanding of a female's role in other social systems. The article, "Codes in Conflict: Post-independence Alienation in Anita Desai's Early Novels" by Josna Rege, is a beautiful discussion piece that offers views on the situation of the Indian woman amidst the turmoil created in a post-independent or more appropriately, a post-colonial setting. Using three of Anita Desai's works, Rege discusses their position caught between "nationalist rhetoric and "women's lived realities" (317). Rege notes the ocurrence of certain

feminine views that reveal themselves throughout writings by female Indian writers including spiritual duty and self-realisation, which must be aligned with the duty of the woman to her family as well as to the social hierarchy. A key disposition made by Rege relates specifically to the "desire" of female characters in the works of Desai. Uma and Maya are perfect examples. Uma desires more than anything to have a life away from her parents and with someone (presumably a husband) who will place her within a respectable social position. Maya, on the other hand, does not suffer from the alienation that Uma endures. She is married; however, her marriage lacks any of the sensual qualities it should contain. Both women exemplify the lived existence of women wherein they are constantly forced to adhere to family and social rules that govern women, the men are free to choose, to live. The women are free to be obedient. Thus there is always a lingering desire; a desire for more, or desire for something better. Desire may also be used to describe the character Angel of Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*.

When the character, Angel Iron, returns to the place of her origin, Adam's Rib, she returns as an outsider "My return was uneventful, dull and common. And, unknown to me, it was my first step into a silence" (Hogan 26). It is within this silence that Angel reconnects with herself and reconnects with a world she'd never known; it became her way to fulfill her desire for finding her place. Under the tutelage of her circle of mothers, including the silent Bush, the bear tamer Anges, and the "god" Dora Rouge, Angel pieces together the fragments of her

past, and by establishing “place” she is able to move beyond the horrors of her past, moreover, “she pieces herself together via an internal narrative” (Hoeful 33). It is Roseanne Hoeful’s article, “Narrative Choreography toward a New Cosmogony: The Medicine Way in Linda Hogan’s Novel Solar Storms” that seeks to discuss the different spiritual forms of woman. It also disusses the growth of Angel into her womanhood, as predicated on the teachings she receives from the women in her life. Hogan’s illustration of the woman through the band of women is important here as, again, we find a female writer using multiple caricatures of the female psyche to flesh out the multiple lived experiences of women of color. Consequently, these women are able to survive partly due to their strong connections with one another.

Diana Garcia’s book of poetry *When LIving Was A Labor Camp*, revisits the power of bonds between women of color. Through these relationships with other women, García emphasizes that her experience as a Chicana is not singular but shared. In “The Girlfriends”, García does not distinguish between “her/my” and “Rosie/I” as she writes about her own and/or her friend’s pregnancy (37). The poem, “Raisins in Summer” similarly emphasizes the shared experiences among female friends. The lines “That’s what you do / on Friday nights, too broke to go out, / asses stuck to cheap vinyl seats. We paint / our toenails Raisins in Summer and joke / about the date who met our kids, then vanished” (55). There is an expression here of a strong sense of community among women, a sharing of even the mundane or disappointing aspects of

everyday life. It is through these communal experiences that García seems to find inspiration and voice, a concept she articulates in “Serpentine Voices: From Silence.” In this poem she explains that “at times the voice becomes / third person ‘we,’ / plural, not imperial, because sometimes / we were all voice, girlfriends, / mis amigas, de parte de, / on behalf of us, / voices drowning out that choking silence” (31). When García speaks about the Chicana experience she is resisting the silencing that threatens a collective female voice.

While García emphasizes the community of women she has experienced, she also explores the way in which Chicanas are often objectified by men and society at large as sexual objects rather than complex human beings. In “The Clog of Her Body,” García writes about how the female body is sexualized on many levels throughout a woman’s life. As an adolescent, the narrator remembers “how he looked you over like a box / of nuts and chews” (57). Even the doctor who tells her “it’s all worn out,” looks at the woman, not with compassion or professionalism, but with a “lust for meat” (58). Similarly, the poem “She Tends Bar” portrays a woman currently without the protection of her man, making her open to advances from strangers viewing her with a singular purpose: “Two men lean back, tracing / the curve of her hips, their eyes / working the rise of her skirt” (24). In both poems, the women’s bodies are perceived by men as public property, to be openly touched, coveted, and discussed.

Is it not ironic that there exists countless parallels between the aforementioned experiences by women of color? It would seem that these women are caught within a maelstrom. The waters, made turbulent by the effects of imperialism do not discriminate; claiming its victims as they sink to the depths of society's ocean. Perhaps it is important to note here that these parallels reveal the ugly truth of a world wherein the societal hierarchy, driven by males, dominates women. This is true for all women. Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House", illustrates this point clearly with women who are not of color; furthermore, it the woman of relatively high economic status who becomes a doll. She becomes a plaything for the men in her life. Nora perhaps enacts the most memorable exit of any heroine in literature, yet, Nora is important in linking the struggles of women around the world together. She leaves her husband and her family in an attempt to dictate space, to find a place where she is more than a play thing. How different then are characters like Nora and Walker's character Celie? Possibly this difference is rooted only as deep as the discussions pertaining to them, and the specific criticisms attributed to their creators and their own fictitious lineage.

Chapter IV

The Problem with Feminist Literary Criticism: Its Failure to Women of Color

Fundamentally, time is forever bound with change. As time passes so too does change occurs. In relation to the social sphere and women, time has changed much. It is unfortunate that these changes have not equally affected all women. Whereas women of European descent have made significant strides within the home as well as within society at large, their progress extends further than what has been accomplished in totality for all women. As women have risen above the past barricades, which have blocked their progress, women have joined together to defend their new place in society. The roots of feminism are therefore traced to the gradual changes that occurred throughout the world. The disproportionate success by women of color, as juxtaposed to the progress made by European-descended women, have created a need to examine the current models of feminism.

Time, Change, and Women

To explain the origin of feminism it is important that one notes the changes that greatly affected the development of the female within the social sphere. The past social roles for both men and women remain subconsciously imbedded within our modern construct of the world. We find it humanely reasonable that there are simply things that men are designed to do while leaving other

responsibilities to females. The ambiguity here is founded on the precipice that this construct did not always exist.

Historians offer evidence of the many ways in which women were not second class when compared with men. In her book *No Turning Back: The HIstory of Feminism and the Future of* Women, Estelle B. Freedman begins her discussion of feminism by noting historical accounts of women working outside the dated female paradigms. For instance, she relates how pre-colonial Africa women took part in more than the upkeep of the home. Women worked the land alongside men. The ability of the women to assist in the production of food "represented a form of wealth" (Freedman 26). Despite the fact that the social makeup did not look as our society does today, this proves that there was a sense of shared responsibility and power among men and women within old societies. Women within a myriad of cultural contexts could own property, run businesses, work as clergy, farm, and take charge of the home still, this power was not universally spread across the globe. This may be evidenced by examining women in old Asian culture. Women in China were like many others in Asia who found themselves bound from birth. As queer as it seems, women were not universally bound around the world. How then did seemingly all women find themselves equally stripped of power and designated as second class beside their male counterparts?

One may place blame here to the rise of imperialism and with it, the spread of European ideals throughout the world as colonialism took root. Thus

women who were in power found themselves lacking while women who had no power to begin with found themselves in greater captivity. Freedman explains: "The world before feminism offers ample evidence that men had more power than women... listen to folk wisdom or read sacred texts, we learn about the virtues of sons and the lesser values of daughters" (18). A closer examination sheds further light on the need for feminism. There are numerous old proverbs and colloquial sayings that negatively reference women. A Zulu quote notes: "A girl is merely a weed" (Qtd. in Freedman 19). While a Dutch proverb reads: "a house full of daughters is like a cellar full of sour beer" (Qtd. in Freedman 19). Upon examining Asian culture, one may find many quotes about women including this one referenced by Freedman: "a girl lets you down twice, once at birth and the second time when she marries" (19). Such ideological references to women strangely coincide with religious precepts, which placed the woman below the male. Exulted scientist and evolutionist Darwin added to the stripping of the female's persona as he sought to use science to prove the superiority of the male over female, including even male species of animals to further drive the point. Women, caught between the proverbially rock and a hard place, had the choice of accepting their marginalization; instead they used the few tools to break down the previously established barriers.

Freedman explains one of the by-products of imperialism was the availability of education. Again, just as colonialism may be traced back to Europe, one may trace the roots of the enlightened female to there. Pioneers

like Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft would help to empower a new generation of women, or more appropriately, feminists. In their wake, the new feminists would make strides in declaring the rights of other women like them. These women would go on to acquire equal access to education, political power, and financial stability while reconstructing the definition of womanhood. Ironically, the procurement of privileged European descended women did not include other women. To an extent, less privileged women were excluded; furthermore, we discover that women of color were usually not included within these new feminist models. The famous words of pioneering feminist Sojourner Truth saying: "Ain't I a woman?" is indicative of a shift in time and the burgeoning changes occurring for women. Sadly, many of theses changes brought to question the aforementioned question posed by Sojourner Truth. Women were making significant changes, yet these changes did not readily apply to women of color who found again that they were different; this time they were simply different by the supposed genetic differences that made them racially inferior.

Feminism and the Black Woman

Modern culture thrives on its ability to provide multiple outlets. Whether one is searching for a particular type of movie, artistically styled music, or fashion apparel item, one will find that there are a plethora of choices. Within the realm of the literature there are multiple genres as well as multiple methods of study, and for that matter, multiple methods of criticism. Writings by women usually have often fallen in line together as they must constantly fight the

hegemonic ideals floating throughout the established literary canon. These works by women must stand the coming onslaught of a traditionally male canon and its proponents who act as skilled surgeons, entering the bodies of work created by women and dissecting them. The slightest indication is all that is required before the surgeon passes judgment: if the work is careful to abide by the largely patriarchal tenets of the literary canon, it receives a clean bill of health. Fortunately, there is help for those works upon which the surgeon finds diseases spread by Amazonian calls of sisterhood. The application of literary theories derived from established feminist theories allow such works to receive a second opinion of sorts and in many cases, the works may find that the second opinion provides a method for validation they would otherwise not have. Such theories have been protective of a base, which consists largely of white females. Women of color, and for this matter Black women, are left without a second opinion and thus, their works are usually dismissed or excluded for portraying the realities of black women, which may not coincide with the lived existence of whites.

Neville and Hamer explain the need to develop a new niche within feminism or feministic literary criticism, that is inclusive to black women as well as women of color. Their “Revolutionary Black Feminism” theory helps to align works that would, otherwise, be excluded from the protection provided by feminism; instead its choice for inclusion is derived from the very qualities that general feminist theories would use to support exclusion. The women note that

their purpose “is to address the gaps in the literature” (438). The gaps, mentioned here are likely the result of a lack of true development in the areas associated with the theoretical development of black feminism. Meaning: current models of feminism, even those which include black women, fail to bolster their work. The “introduction” of Revolutionary Black Feminism by Neville and Hamer revolves around the following tenetenetsts: Revolutionary Vision is Dynamic; Racial, Gender, and Sexual Oppression are reconfigured within periods of capitalist restructuring; and Oppression consists of structural and ideological components.

The first tenets is about how dynamism is rooted ideally in the belief that change is inevitable. Thus, as things inevitably change, so, too, must precepts within any ideological constructs. Therefore, Revolutionary Black Feminism, as proposed by Neville and Hamer, will grow and change with its audience. It will not require that those it seeks to protect change to fit its mold. However, the dynamic mechanisms at play will not admonish those things, which remain constant. As evidence, Neville and Hamer note the sexual abuse instigated by white slave owners, which has strangely continued to remain a trend in modern society as they note “the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults in the United States are intraracial” (439). Therefore, a work like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would not supercede or negate a work such as Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. Despite their differences, the works would be accepted on the basis that they illustrate different points.

Neville and Hamer's second tenet argument begins profoundly by stating: "Black women's experiences are, in part, shaped by a myriad of interlocking systems of oppressions that are framed within the context of the political economy of a given society" (440); that is to say, capitalism molds the experiences of those whom it affects. Thus there is no question that black women are affected on dual levels: first directly, and secondly by black males. To an extent, children (especially black children) are affected by their disproportional placement at the bottom of the global capitalistic scale. The characters Claudia, Freida, and Pecola of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, offer examples of life for children of color who find that their father has been beaten by society, and in turn he beats his wife who thus reigns power over her children.

The third tenet proposes that we remain in touch with the social structures within a postcolonial society. It is, after all, the multiple levels within society that provide a variance in the experiences of women. This truth is evident for black women as well. Women at the bottom of the societal structure are often affected the most, while women at the middle or the top find that there are certain areas for which they have been granted immunity; they remain untouched by plights which women at the bottom attend as if they were normal.

The tenets proposed by Neville and Hamer are adept in their inclusion of specific intricacies that other methods of feminism have failed to include. Although their work is not an end all solution, it does highlight the occasional or situational problems with general feminism, which begs the question: what

elements of feminism should remain as they are without excluding women of color?

Developing a new Multicultural Feminism Model

As changes have surfaced within the global community perhaps now is the time to begin the true development of a new multicultural feminism. A key argument of this presented research stems from the proposal to create and define a new multicultural feminism. Steps toward defining multicultural feminism are not entirely indistinct. There has been previous scholarship, which not only supports the development of multicultural feminism, it seeks to explain how the initial groundwork is already in place. Becky Thompson's article "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism" discusses the next step in casting literary feminism outside that of the previously mentioned hegemonic feminism. Thompson reiterates the claims that hegemonic feminism "is white led, marginalizes the activism and the world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression" (337). Within her body of research, Thompson explicates the rise of an international movement dating back to the 1970's. Essentially, it is this movement that began early to unite women from multiple ethnic backgrounds with antiracist whites. Accordingly, white women may not have realized that their quest to unite was built upon a psychological construct of inherited white privilege. Thus, they had been privileged in many ways due to the fact that they were white, and could not always understand the peculiarities associated with

being a minority. Thompson's research is careful in its reminder that the development of a new multi-racial feminism is inclusive to all women. This may however contrast with direct protestations to define ethnic modes of feminism, and to a degree, feministic literary criticism. This would include the likes of Alice Walker's womanist theory. A theory built upon the very idea that the lived experiences of black women make them different from other women. Essentially, Walker is not wrong here. It would seem that if women are to truly unite under a new feminism model, one must first learn to appreciate the specific peculiarities created by ethnic differences without using those differences to create a divisive wall. The development of a new model would therefore find the many commonalities between the lived experiences of all women. Prudently, I would like to make a note here of three key commonalities shared amongst all women.

All Women Suffer from Societal Oppression

No matter what background a woman comes from, she is, from birth, oppressed by the very factors upon which her birth negates. The female sphere is designed and constructed by patriarchal forces that extend natural authority to males. In the case of black women (as well as women of color), their male counterparts, though seemingly stripped of any power within the world are given authority over their women. Consequently, a woman must maneuver the social sphere by first overcoming the genetic defects associated with her birth as a female. This would include any of the unique features inherent to being a female: sensitivity, compassion, beauty (male proposed), understanding,

mothering. A woman must know her place or else she may find herself reprimanded or punished for her actions. The act of silencing is another method of oppression that also seeks to punish women. Women, like children, should be seen and not heard right?

All Women Have Been Abused

The lived experiences of black women are decorously noted by recurring bouts of abuse. However, more often than not the abuse of white women has largely been left unexplored or discussed to the same degree that other women have been. Whereas blacks and other women of color have been vocal about the forms of abuse for which they have suffered, white women's stories of abuse are no less prevalent. The forms by which the abuse takes place may be different, yet that does not dispel the fact that some form of abuse occurs. If one is oppressed, then they are consequently abused. In this fashion, women are again united by the common association of their experience with abuse, physical and/or psychological but essentially abuse.

Women Work Harder than Men to Establish Place

The act of establishing place in the world is fundamental step in one's psychological maturation. Women, who are again born outside the privilege of manhood must exert greater effort in establishing place within society. Naturally men have a genetic advantage as that the subconscious mantras that permeate the existence of life are generally male. Thus, a male finds the world a place where they must make their mark while women are immediately confronted with

the problem of knowing where they can make their mark. The world itself remains largely the realm of the patriarch; furthermore, it is through the manipulation of usually masculine principles that one achieves success and contentment in the world. Female's therefore must find their way in world wherein they simply act as accents, decorative pieces in the world's living room of man.

By examining the account of shared commonalities between the lived experiences of all women it should therefore seem unquestionable that there exists a divided front within the realm of feminism, and to a lesser extent feministic criticism. The established models of feminism have become outdated in a globalized world. Colonialism has touched everyone. Literature, alone, provides a firm testament to the lives of women. Black women, as well as other women of color have been affected differently, yet it does not override the fact that all women have been affected. Perhaps time will be the deciding factor in bringing together a truly united front that does not separate the Celie's and Nora's of the world. Instead one will finally acknowledge that they are all women and equally included and protected by a united multicultural feministic front.

Conclusion: The Battle Rages On

On multiple levels all women have been oppressed. Despite the varied effects of that oppression on women of color, and to a degree, black women, the oppression has had the same effect of pushing women to the point where they must go above and beyond in order to counter the attempts to silence and marginalize them. The silencing and marginalization that has occurred among women-despite changing conditions-continues to present a problematic situation. Black women, and for that matter women of color, have come a long way in their journey to find not only acceptance but also to define a space that has been long denied to them. 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. It is the same house that nurtured Celie's silence and told Pilate she was unnatural. This same house was likely filled with mirrors causing the young Zora Neale Hurston to question what it meant to be a colored woman. However, this house imposed far more.

Zora's reflection in the house of imperialism, built by colonization, was likely battered by the sexist views she endured two fold as a black woman. Her

character Nanny explained the woman's role as a beast of burden. Thus a black woman's place had been dictated by the male powers at rule. This supposed "place" as dictated by sexist males is also made plain when one remembers the numerous criticisms black women have suffered for simply trying to live and exist in a world that acknowledges their existence within their own Europeanized, chauvinistic thought processes. Thomas Jefferson's vocalism for Phyllis Wheatley is no less than Wright's for Hurston. Thus, our current society is no different as it, too, reveals the ugly existence of sexism as perpetuated by males against black females. No where is this more evident than in works created by females. These works may be pieces of literature, songs, or artwork, yet they all tell the same story of imperialism's house.

The house that colonization built lacks a bookcase that is filled eclectically. The works of the woman must prove themselves if they are to establish place alongside the prolific writings of men. However, they must be precarious to avoid offending or including any element that would obviate their work. Black women have found more often that their writings must attempt this by not offending Europeanized males as well as black males. Ironically they must also be careful not to include details within their writings that would keep them from being separated from other writings by women.

The house built by imperialism remains standing today. Perhaps we must be reminded that the very nature of our society has been built upon the precipice of colonialism. As a foundation we must continually work to evolve our methods

of thinking in reference to that which the colonizer declared as inferior, different, inconsequential and the like. 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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