REDRESSING THE TRAUMA: GENDER, SLAVERY AND SURVIVAL IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: The collective trauma and memories, ancestral spirits and ghosts have constituted an aesthetic and cultural paradigm for diasporan Africans. Addressing racial or gendered injuries on black bodies is extremely difficult, for tracing its contours in all its complexities never seems to end. For the wounds or scars on their bodies and in their minds, often unnamed, are still persistent. Foregrounding the injured black body living in two continents stretching from coast to coast, witnessing horrific ruptures inwardly and outwardly, is not an easy task. The psychic wounds inflicted by forced migration, the pain of being displaced, fragmented and fractured, and the motif of longing and return, embodied a range of voices that float from afar, crying for the need to redress. (Re) dressing those "points of entanglement" deep with scars, recollections, histories, traumas, and haunting memories, necessitates healing and change (Glissant 1989: 26). The paper analyses violent identity formations, gendered/racial ones, and diasporic experiences. It casts how healing narratives or healers helped black women to redress their wounds with reference to Paule Marshall's novel Praisesong for the Widow (1983) and other African women writers.

It is Africa your Africa that springs up again
Springs up patiently obstinately
And whose fruits ripen with
The bitter flavor of freedom (David Diop)

The Blacks are not originally American. People from different regions of Europe came to America and established their colonies there, in search of an independent and prosperous life. But the Black did not go to America in pursuit of freedom and wealth. He was forcibly taken there and America bestowed on him terrible slavery and colossal poverty. He had to abandon his language, his culture, his history and, in general, his entire African racial legacy. What remained with him was his African body and African mind. Over a period of time white food entered his body and white culture took possession of his mind. His African umbilical cord was cut for all time by destiny. He was never able to reach African shores. Such Black leaders as Garvey made schemes to take him back to Africa but these did not materialize. Even the Whites thought of sending him back to Africa but did not succeed. However, it is beyond doubt that he has been nursing a curiosity, an attraction for Africa. He has tried to find an answer to the question, "What is Africa to me?" similarly it is

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undoubtedly true that Africa has given substance and meaning to his life. However, he has not remained wholly African. He has had to accept the language, culture and dress of the Whites, though he could not claim an equal share in their religion and culture.

The American Black and the Indian Dalit are members of a "closed" society in their respective countries. Both have been victims of a peculiar class structure; the Black of a racial type and the Dalit, of untouchability. Race is nature-made while caste is man-made. Blacks could not change the color of their skin nor could the untouchables their caste. Man alone is responsible for this unholy distinction based on color and caste. At times a completely fair complexioned Black tries to conceal the fact that he is a Black. Similarly an untouchable may try to fraudulently hide his caste. The efforts of both have been total failures. There is no difference whatsoever between the position of the Blacks in America and that of the untouchables in India. And hence for a long period of time both were caught in the whirlpool of self-denigration and self-hatred. Both were kept behind the bars of fatalism. In order to perpetuate this imprisonment, the Whites resorted to some myths and symbols from the Bible, and the high-class Hindus, to the Vedas and the Manusmriti.

What could they do in this helpless condition? Leave it to God and tell Him their tale of woe and suffering? A Black slave says:

> In the Lord
> In the Lord
> My soul has found accord
> In the Lord.

In the final analysis, one's condition should be considered as the fruit of one's own actions. If the utter helplessness of life crosses the boundaries of endurance, then death, it is to be hoped, will be sent to emancipate us. Another such slave says:

> My Lord, He calls me.
> He calls me by the thunder
> The trumpet sounds within my soul.

The Blacks being landless and defenseless said goodbye to the South and moved North where millions of them had to live despicable lives in ghettoes. Even then they struggled and sought education. They fought for liberation and gave up fatalism. They became aggressive and today's Black has started saying confidently, "Black is beautiful."

American Black literature made real progress only after the First World War. Before that, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Charles Chestnut and James Weldon Johnson made noteworthy contributions to poetry and novel. During the period 1920-30 various facets of the Blacks' artistic achievement were manifested. There was a wave of art and social education in Black life. During this period, a "new Black" came to the forefront. On behalf of young writers, Langston Hughes, a poet and a novelist, presented the manifesto of Black literature thus:

> We younger Negro artists who create, now intend to express our dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If White people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. Now we are beautiful.

African diasporic women writer's monumental texts burst into those tough routes of coercive physical, cultural and spiritual dislocations emphasizing on each character's personal odyssey and their process of healing. The characters in their narratives demonstrate a fuller understanding of wounds or injuries, and legacies of trauma, pain and suffering – bodily, emotionally and psychologically from which they seek healing. In a sense, the writings showcase both the achievements and challenges of women who struggled with issues of imperialism, racial and gender injury, sociopolitical forces, displacement, and language. Ultimately, by reweaving history through their works, they delineated a common ground of cultural retention as well as continuities for multitude of wounded bodies. Embedded within the powerful acts of storytelling by numerous historical re-engagements and re-visioning, accounts of reconciliation and reparation are narrated. The acts of remembering, storytelling, healing, and reconstructions of history (allied to redressing), all function as nurturing grounds and signifying practices linking the Diasporic and Continental Africans withing the space of Homeland (imagined or lived), centering on the subject of transatlantic kinship.

Re-reading the submerged voices unleashes those psychological and physical forces that constitute communities in the present. The immersion is a necessary engagement, for not just knowing and reading the imperialistic design, but all the more for reliving into a distinctly African world consisting of suffocated, traumatized and injured bodies. Each black body has a painful history and story to be addressed that transcends theoretical meditations and articulates massive intersections built on the collective memory of experience. Their stories move beyond an A4 size paper, as the diasporic author reinvents characters through acts of remembrance. For the story itself, relives and narrates the whole spectacle of the Middle Passage. It, in fact, is "much too powerful to be 'owned' by any one person or group of people; rather the words 'own' those who speak [or write] them" (Stoller 1997: 25). In essence, the author evokes the spiritual essence of the text in a manner that belongs to self and the larger African communities. African American novelist Gloria Naylor astutely believes that the truth (in the stories) need to address the psychic wounds "as painfully and minutely as [one] know[s] how… ultimately it can lead someone as psychologically scarred… to look at [the] story and say, 'Oh my God I see parts of myself in her story, let me try to do something about that' in that way [fiction] can affect change without the book preaching to people" (Ashford 2005: 86). Likewise, Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* remembers and reflects on the slaves' painful stories as she states in an interview with Amanda Smith:

> Beloved was also… those black slaves whom we don't know; who did not survive that passage, who amounted to a nation, who simply left one place, disappeared and

> didn't show up on the other shores. I had to be dragged, I suppose by them, kicking and screaming, into this book, because it is just too much. (Morrison 1987: 51)

In a broader sense, Morrison's views have been shared by many writers who are unraveling women's histories and memories in new and exciting ways. *Beloved*, in many ways has invoked those ancestors who were "unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried" and she attempts to "properly, artistically, bury … them" (Rusahdy 1999: 39). Morrison's focus on the embodied memory of slavery is an invocation to all those countless other ghosts of the African diaspora who wish to be heard and healed. Apart from Morrison, many African American women writers have created such profoundly bold characters whose tremendous role as healers cured the physical and psychological illnesses of women in their communities. Critical documents like Gay Wilentz's *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Disease*, and Cassie Premo Steele's *We Heal from Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldua*, document healing, change, and reshaping history. Wilentz "examines women writers form diverse ethnic backgrounds as cultural workers who aim, through their writings, to heal self and community from … socially constructed diseases" (Wilentz 2000: 3). Wilentz rightfully acknowledges, and likewise shares many inspirational thoughts on healing by contemporary black women writers.

Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass Cypress and Indigo*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and a host of works addressed the deep psyches of black women providing a rich corpus of healing narratives. A great deal of interest in the African American past by these writers has guided readers towards a better understanding of wounding (physical and psychic) encountered by black female characters in their daily lives and the examination of a network of female healers on their journey towards reconstituting the individual self, relationships, and the community as a whole. Women are significantly the thematic and structural focus in these narratives, and healers assume the responsibility of nurturing, and, by extension, heal and influence characters experiencing dislocations and disruptions.

In essence, such texts have joined the growing feminist landscape, influencing diverse organizations, communities, social networks, and institutions creating a whole new world of women literary healers and activists. As such, women healers in their mission towards personal and cultural healing awaken characters from their embodied alienation from African diasporic communal structures. As healers, transmitters and preservers of culture, they have upheld African ancestral traditions maintaining unity among black diaspora populations. Black women writers demonstrated that awareness and knowledge of cultural history is important to heal the fractures in the contemporary times. A major region which effectively illustrates this point is evidenced in the Sea Islands, a location where African derived practices are highly visible.

Born in the United States to Barbadian parents, Paule Marshall's homeland includes both Barbados and Brooklyn. Her narratives document issues of migration, displacement, home, 'return' and community bonding that largely influence cultural identity formations. Marshall is commended for synthesizing both "African

Caribbean" and "African American" heritages, as she claims, "I am embracing both these cultures and I hope that my work reflects what I see as a common bond" (Russell 1988: 15). She emphasizes on 'return' to sources, and advocates acceptance of the past as she states in an interview "you have to psychologically go through the chaos to overcome it" (De Veaux 1979: 128). In addition to unleashing the submerged voices, Marshall calls for remembrance of cultural practices, necessary for constructing the female self, through women, since they have been the oral transmitters of histories for centuries. Marshall portrays black women achieving wholeness through usage of collective past, African family traditions, community building, and responsibility. Healing is crucial in the lives of these black women, at certain junctures, particularly for renewal and regeneration. Marshall's third novel *Praisesong for the Widow* is a text filled with West African spiritual and cultural icons and codes. The process of healing works best in this wonderful narrative.

Avey Johnson, the protagonist of this novel experiences the loss of being culturally dislocated and the price she had to pay was far beyond imagination. Little did she realize that her vacation cruise with her 'upper-middle' class friends would pull her involuntarily to her past and awaken her spiritually. This sixty-three-year-old widow subconsciously recognizes the denial of her heritage which is manifested in a strange dream (on the cruise) that arouses her memory of the Ibo Landing. In the dream, her dead Great-Aunt Cuney attempts to pull Avey back to her abandoned heritage. 'Giulia Scarpa asserts that "the dream and her hallucinated reveries bring her archetypal memory of Africa and of African-American myths to the surface of her recalcitrant consciousness" (Scarpa 1989: 99). Actually, the dream allows her past to emerge from a long absence, as it got lost in Avey's successful pursuit of material security. Years ago, when Avey was a child, her Great-Aunt Cuney narrated to her the story of Ibo Landing at Tatem Island, a black enclave in South Carolina. The tales recalled the endurance of the African slaves who arrived in chains to America but walked on the water back to their homeland leaving the white folks "with they mouth hung open" (Marshall 1983: 38-39). Avey's childhood journeys, and the story of the Ibos' walking across the water encodes the crucial lesson of African American psychic survival in a hostile culture. The "dream sequence" and "the Creole cultural tradition allows for an alternative sequence, where the sleeper is patient and there is an external agent, usually an ancestor from the world of the spirits" (Pollard 2010: 28). The dead ancestor's influence on the life of the living in African derived cultural practices and belief systems incorporates vital threads and abandoning them leads to serious offence as it occurs to our protagonist. The dream or the spirit motivator pulls Avey into the cultural landscape forcing her to remember those threads long forgotten, or lost due to materialistic individualism, thereby casting her as a cultural being in the present.

After experiencing communion with the black community guided by her spiritual parent in the form of Lebert Joseph, Avey gains an understanding of her African lineage and vows to pass it over to the future generations in much the same way as her Great-Aunt Cuney and Cuney's grandmother did. Avey's memory of the rituals and the story of the Ibos on Tatem are integral to her self-development, for remembering the tale fosters Avey's rediscovery of her true identity and reconnection

with her ancestral land. She takes on a messianic role at the close of the novel to continue the storytelling legacy to her grandchildren, and young members of her U.S. black community. The rituals demonstrate transformation in Avey from being a member of localized community to a diasporic one. Avey is able to weave the disconnected/fragmented parts of her past into a new fabric of life. Through these rituals, Avey not only locates her place amongst the black Americans, acknowledges "the need to stay globally connected and maintain relationships locally, but also uphold cross-generational ties strongly" (Shamail 2015: 436).

Avey attains spiritual maturation in her journey toward reclamation of self. Community-building forces heal her body and spirit, rekindling her connection with her cultural roots, thereby attaining wholeness.

African American women and Dalit women in India narrate almost identical experiences. Race/caste, class, gender and location generally determine the kind of experience as one recount. Centuries of oppression made black women is America face the situation boldly with a steely resolve and work hard in spheres of their interest and emerge triumphant ultimately. Maya Angelou, Mae Jenison, Oprah Winfry, Serena and Venus Williams, Toni Morrison among others have amply demonstrated that they could reach the top unshackling themselves. In a way they enriched the American society and life.

Racial discrimination is as pervasive as gender discrimination even in America.

Many black women suffer in silence and endure scars of sexual abuse and harassment from childhood. Sexual assault and rape are common means of subjugating a black woman and her spirit. Hence, they invariably train their children to cope with discrimination in any form without offering resistance. It is as painful journey for a black woman from childhood till the end.

Apart from snide remarks about her color, physique and nature a black woman is also branded a criminal. Most of the marginalized all over the world have to face this charge. Questioning their moral fiber is the privilege of better placed sections in society. Their integrity is never accepted or appreciated, leave alone rewards that are supposed to accrue for a person of impeccable integrity.

The misconception that a black woman sexually fragile is the most tragic and traumatic aspect that should render a woman feel disgraced and disrobed. It corrodes her conscience, consumes her like poison in a scorpion's sting and scalds her constantly like an invisible flame. She is always viewed as a commodity, a 'body' to satiate carnal desires of men.

'Silence' is the most potent weapon wielded to keep off blues. Festering emotional wounds of sexual exploitation, childhood abuse and workplace compulsions render a black woman suffer in silence. They are often linked while abusing men, denigrating their birth obnoxiously.

She further continues her explication:

> Social silence refers to societal rules that dictate when individuals should speak or be silent. A foremost manifestation of the social construction of silence is the phenomenon commonly known as a conspiracy of silence, whereby people collectively ignore something. conspiracies of silence thus highlight the

> fundamental yet under theorized tension between personal awareness and public discourse. Whether they are generated by pain, shame, embarrassment, or fear, conspiracies of silence revolve around undiscussables, let alone unmentionables, that are "generally known but cannot be spoken." (Mouli: 60)

Black American Woman Poet Nilence Foxworth (Das 1993: 48). She flaunts her African heritage:

> Yes, I am an African woman,
> And like the rainbow,
> I have embraced the world,
> And given it my PRIMARY
> HUMAN colors –
> I have fought many wars
> Plus untold battles –
> Standing tall, as a cypress tree
> I am fearless. (Foxworth 1887: 160)

Florence Howe, the American poet and scholar, extols Contemporary Women Poetry as having opened itself "to the dailiness of housework and gardening, to the joy and grief of caring for family, to explorations of sexuality, to the politics of a starving world and to the pleasures of a creative life" (Howe 1993: xxxvii). The trends of naturalism, nature-bonding and humanism apparent in such poetry, create a global sisterhood, which unifies in re-locating a bridge between diverse areas of the human civilization process. Now black women writers began to portray their life in their characteristic language. They abandoned the idea of whitewashing their black skins and minds. The woman writer Lorraine Hansberry earned massive popularity in the field of drama with her play A Raisin in the Sun. The woman poet Gwendolyn Brooks got the Pulitzer Prize and now William Demby, john Williams, Melvin Kelly and Letoi Jones are in the forefront. The Black writer after 1960 has turned revolutionary.

The perception that a black woman lacks femininity is a blessing in disguise as it protects her from leering, lecherous men and their nauseating advances that make a work place or institution abominable. But she hates her perceived masculinity. It is common knowledge that conformity to or confronting perceived images does not help any way

As everyone knows color is the basis of racism and ensuing brutality, African American woman is constrained to feel unwanted and discriminated on account of her color. It may be termed a scar or wound that constantly rankles resulting in low self esteem. She invents her own methods to cope with such situations. Slowly she starts to appreciate herself for what she is and not for what others expect her to be. Their expectations are quietly ignored and quickly buried. Black women successfully demonstrated the pleasure in painful raising of their best to strengthen their self esteem and guarded them vigilantly. As the child turns a confident woman, a black mother feels triumphant and enjoys self-realization immensely. Resistance against gender based exploitation, struggle for respectability, and desire to establish their identity mark the enchanting endeavors of women suppressed everywhere

Resurgence of Dalits in India, black women in America, aboriginals in Australia and he ever struggling women in Africa is an instance of women power on the rise which is desirable, remarkable and justifiable in tune with the historic moment of black literature

Thus, such a study becomes an important instrument for redeeming historical inequities, social/gender justice and distortions through a Return to Nature and to the Feminine/Creative Principles of Life. It also becomes a significant index for expansive literary and cultural mappings.

The necessity for the formation of a counter-canon or a separate literary genre arises, not out of a deliberate gendered approach but a negative response against continuous chauvinistic attempts at stifling voices of Female freedom. The earlier tendencies of disparaging women's writings as invalid, delirious outpourings of the Mad Woman in the Attic, to be relegated to the margins of Mainstream Literature, have given way to the recognition of this emancipator Poetic Corpus as a significant and continuously evolving discipline of study. The locating of the major sites of poetic constructions of Indian-English vis-à-vis Euro-American Women Authors at the pivotal point of the study, generates noteworthy correlations, literary re-configurations

So we have reached an age in which World Women writers have successfully transcended the limiting barriers of hardened, static viewpoints, fragmentations and identity-conflicts and arrived at a balanced ideal of amalgamation, assimilation and an identifiable strength for aesthetic completeness. In evoking this new consciousness of these Sisters of the Soil, we also take stock of a new Female Historiography and Trajectory, which registers all wholesome but multi-dimensional Poetic Vision in a real conflict-ridden world. It is of extreme urgency today, during the progress of this new millennium, that we realize and recognize the indisputable potency of Women's Poetry for changing our lives and creating natural Human Bridges for a better and more peaceful 'World-Order'. So, in Black literature women writers are always in search of their respective identities, protest against inequality is formed. The literature is life-oriented and it has awareness of social commitment. The literary language of this writing is cultural revolt and aim is to find new cultural values.

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