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The Problem of Representation of Characters in Black Male-Authored Texts: Womanism as Antidote

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The process of discovering new meanings that contradict previous ones is central to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. The womanist perspective in feminism draws upon some of the tenets of deconstruction to criticise the writings of black males in the United States, in its bid to advance the African-American sense of community which is gender-sensitive. Womanism is an aspect of feminism which represents the black women's response to gender discrimination in the United States. Unlike core Western feminism which tends to favour the separation of the sexes, womanism argues for a union of males and females in joint endeavours to promote the advancement of the human race. Hence, it claims that it is "traditionally universalist", "capable" and "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (*Walker: 1984:xi)*.

Another brand of womanism has recently been enunciated by Clenora Hudson Weems. It is referred to as 'Africana Womanism' and it purports to comprehensively cater for the needs, yearnings and aspirations of African people in the continent and the diaspora. It goes beyond Walker's womanist philosophy by completely dissociating itself from all forms of Western feminism. It also views Walker's brand as inherently tied to the Western feminist orientation. It further regards Western feminist theory and practice with suspicion and mistrust, pointing out that such an orientation caters essentially for the needs of Western white women, while paying lip-service and token recognition to non-white females such as African-American women.

Hudson-Weems' Africana Womanism is the most recent and current concept in the task of integration and unification of people of African ancestry in the world. She defines the concept as "an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in "*African Culture*" and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women (*Nnaemeka, 1998:154-155*).

She argues that her ideology "critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana Womanist" (155). She clinches her argument by asserting that:

> *Africana Womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both White feminism and Black feminism; moreover, to the extent of naming in particular, Africana Womanism differs from African feminism.*

Clearly there is a need for separate and distinct identity for the Africana woman and her movement. Some white women acknowledge that the feminist movement was not designed with the Africana woman in mind (Ibid).

Thus, Hudson-Weems distances her ideology from that of Walker and other feminist exponents. She even goes to the extent of dissociating her endeavour from the general umbrella of the feminist movement and views the term "feminism" as a white woman's invention:

> *Africana men and women do not accept the idea of Africana women as feminists. There is a general consensus in the Africana community that the feminist movement, by and large, is the white woman's movement* ... (ibid).

Whereas Hudson Weems' Africana Womanism concept offers a plethora of points for regular and useful references for this study and for Africanists in general, Walker's Womanist orientation will be more integral to this analysis which is clearly focused on the quest by black women in America for uplift in their predominantly white society. Again, one is not so sure of what to make out of Hudson-Weems' categorical and complete excision of her concept from the feminist movement which, in any case, provided the raw ingredients that in turn prompted this analysis. For, it was the feminist criticisms of the works of African-American male literary artists and the desire to find an accompanying feminist fold which is accommodating, racially uplifting, but essentially American (with which to anchor the black female quest for fulfillment in the United States), that elicited this study. Hudson-Weems' model is indeed useful and commendable but it applies more to Africans worldwide than specifically to African-Americans as a resilient minority within the United States.

In addition, Hudson-Weems argues that gender issues have never been of primary focus among African people and that: "In general, Africanans focus on tangible things that can offer an amelioration of or exit from (white) oppression, which are of utmost importance for survival in the Africana community" (56). She thus distances the African woman from the white Western

woman. But, while agreeing with her contention that problems militating against the survival of Africans such as white oppression, economic and political issues dominate the agenda of black people, it would be wrong for her to dismiss lightly the issue of gender difference among African people. For indeed, gender matters play a major role in our daily life and decisions. For long in Africa, the male child had been desired, sought after and accorded greater respect than the female offspring. Hudson-Weems does not deny this reality, but Alice Walker and other feminists are very vocal in their condemnation of such a practice. They want equal treatment for males and females - children and adults alike.

An interesting phenomenon observable from this critical inquiry is that some of the black females especially in the male authored works reflect more than a single trend. It is common to encounter a black woman endowed with high intellect who, in addition to obtaining lofty academic qualifications, equally manifests great acumen in economics, politics and other social concerns. Consequently, they are viewed as 'rounded characters' and are cited fairly regularly to buttress instances in the analysis. The feminist criticism of primary male-authored works therefore brings into sharp focus some weaknesses and lapses in those works as a step towards encouraging the rectification and reordering of portrayals to reflect a balanced and humane society. This preoccupation is central to the Womanist Orientation.

Above all, the cardinal issue being contended is the perceived patriarchal structure of the society which feminists argue, is reflected in all facets of life on earth, but which womanists mitigate by actively initiating and fostering dialogue between women and men as a way to reconcile the two genders and encourage cooperation among them. But, in spite of these efforts, there is a lingering feeling that exponents of the various shades of feminism seek to subvert the male domination of the human society to their advantage.

Since womanists desire a better deal for all, it would be useful to view their assessments of literary texts written by black males as an on-going attempt to attain fulfillment not only for women, but for every one in society. Their assessments of texts try to counter divisive appraisals of the writings by Western-oriented feminists.

To the womanists, the reflection of females in works by male writers need not remain a contentious issue because they envisage mutually acceptable, enduring and sustaining solutions to such unwholesome reflections; they adopt a patient, community-affirming (non-sex biased) approach to try to resolve the perceived discrepancies. In an essay, "(En) gender(ing) Discourse: Palaver-Palava and African Womanism", Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996) posits womanism as a sure and durable panacea not only to literary, but also other socio-political problems in the society. She displays feminism in the process:

methods of attaining their quests are often divisive and disruptive. For instance, feminists single out two black male writers (Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison) for scathing criticism:

> *The male authors have portrayed male heroes and male protagonists almost exclusively, and the complexity and vitality of black female experiences have been fundamentally ignored. Consider, for example, the depiction of black women in the two most acclaimed black novels of the twentieth century. In* ***Native Son****, Richard Wright portrays Bigger Thomas's mother and sister `realistically' as decrepit nagging bitches. Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie Mears is a pathetic nothing. Mary Rambo, the black female in Ralph Ellison's* ***Invisible Man*** *is a symbolic manny figure, ... It is a matter of historical record that, until recently, black writing in the United States had been systematically discriminatory against black women. (Calvin C. Hernton, 1987:39)*

On the other hand, womanists make allowance for male writers. Sherley Anne Williams argues:

> *Having confronted what black men have said about us, it is now time for black feminist critics (womanists) to confront black male writers with what they have said about themselves. What is needed is a thoroughgoing examination of male images in the works of black writers. This is a necessary step in ending the separatist tendency in Afro-American criticism and in achieving in Afro-American Literature feminist theory's avowed aim of challenging the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism. (Gates,Jr., 1990:74)*

Ogunyemi *(1996)* ascribes womanists' ability to confront the perceived lopsided male-prone society to their flexibility and maturity which is in conformity with their material disposition, steadfastness of purpose and their all-inclusiveness or communality. She therefore, joins Walker in characterising the approach as:

> *Whole, "or as 'round ' women-women who love other women ... who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people... for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males," especially as husbands.* (119)

Although Wright and Ellison have been criticised for lapses in their portrayal of black females in literary works, both feminist (womanists inclusive) and non-feminist writers recognise their centrality to the black literary tradition in the United States. Indeed, the renowned African-American Scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., observes in the introduction to the ground-breaking anthology, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* that:

> *Much has been made - too much of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black women's literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism... But no literary movement can be understood apart from the institutional and demographic facts of reading and writing that sustain - or fail to sustain - the author and her audience. This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet stands independent of the black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison.* (2)

In other words, despite feminists' rejection of Wright's and Ellison's texts as models, womanists view them as central to the development of the black literary tradition in the United States. Furthermore, while the feminists criticise Wright and Ellison for perceived lapses in the depiction of black women, a reading of Baldwin's and Hughes's works (especially their key texts - *Go Tell It On the Mountain and Not without Laughter*) tells a different story.

In evaluating feminist criticisms of primary African-American male-authored texts, it is obvious that one cannot avoid the charges levelled against such works. In "The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Towards a Literary History of Black Women," Mary Helen Washington *(Gates, ed.1990)* attributes the exclusion or misrepresentation of African-American women in texts by black male writers to their literary tradition which "has so often been used to exclude or misrepresent women" (32). Washington points out that men (especially black men) have employed that tradition to oppress and suppress black women in America. She mentions pioneer black literary geniuses such as Alexander Crummel, Francis Grimke, and W.E.B. Du Bois who influenced later writers like Wright and Ellison, as examples of black male writers who were decidedly opposed to the admission of women to membership of the Negro literary and intellectual organisation, since they "opposed from the beginning that the American Negro Academy - a kind of think tank for that intellectual black elite called the Talented Tenth - be open only to ' Men of African descent' " (33). It is therefore legitimate for feminists to feel aggrieved over such remarks which foster disaffection. Their uncompromising stand widens the gender divisions within the black community and sets them apart from the womanists.

According to Sherley Anne Williams, the Womanist Orientation encourages a return to certain unique ideals of the nineteenth century black men which emphasised nobility of stature, self-restraint and physical self control as avenues to moral superiority over the white society, and which enabled the "black patriarch" (the black man) to provide for and protect his "dependents" (family) rather than wield authority or exploit their dependency to achieve his own privilege *(Gate, 1990:72)*. The examples of Frederick Douglas (a former Slave) and Josiah Henson (the model in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)* are cited as reflections of nineteenth century black men that manifested such trends. Williams maintains that at the time:

> *Black male heroic stature was most often achieved within the context of marriage, family, and black community - all of which depend on a relationship with, if not a black woman, at least other black people.* (73)

Although feminism is not a new concept, contemporary western feminism employs current theories and yardsticks to criticise books written in the past. Such a practice is not new, but it can only be viable and meaningful if the original contexts and informing visions of such works are taken into account. It is necessary for instance to adopt a historical perspective to examine the central texts whose authors (renowned black male writers) have so often been charged with poor portrayal of women (black women especially) in their texts. There is a significant time gap between contemporary feminism and the sensibilities and preoccupations of earlier periods which may have influenced the writings of those authors more than the fact of their gender classification. But, the time factor is not an excuse for writers to misrepresent anybody in creative undertakings. However, a clear awareness of germane issues which dominated the literary and socio-cultural scenes at the period the books were written enhances our understanding of how and why these writers portrayed people and events the way they did. Issues such as the Great Depression and the two world wars for example, influenced and shaped such writings.

In addition to the foregoing, the theoretical and ideological basis of the writings should be taken into account. Womanists appear to have done this by being willing to expand their scope to include portrayals of black males instead of limiting their focus to what has been written about women.

It has increasingly become obvious that these writers were concerned with the prevailing economic, racial and class structures of the time which tended to de-emphasise the role of women and took precedence over all other factors. For instance, the concerns of Marxist theory underscored much of *Native Son* and other writings in the 1930s. In other words, feminists are right in observing that black females are few and are accorded scanty portrayal in *Native Son,* but the truth is that the author seemed more motivated by other issues than a phobia for women or a deliberate desire to make a caricature of black females. The uncompromising stance adopted by core western feminists and their apologists towards creative works of black male writers like Wright and Ellison probably aided Walker in pioneering the concept of womanism. A major influence on Wright at the time of writing *Native Son and Black Boy* was Marxism. Writers in the western hemisphere at this period, especially those from downtrodden African-American backgrounds embraced Marxism because it seemed to hold out a glimmer of hope for poor people who were oppressed and exploited under the capitalist system. Even writers who did not go so far as to join the Communist Party were influenced by Marxist analysis in their portrayals of their society and factors shaping individual lives. Particularly in the era before World War II, many African-Americans, having suffered so long under slavery, racial and economic discriminations, placed their hope in the Marxist collective struggle to create a new society as a means to actualise their dreams of equality and economic uplift.

Marxism is a theory which asserts the equality of all peoples and races. It raises the possibility of people living full, useful and rewarding lives. The Marxist maxim, "to each, according to his needs," appears to answer the yearnings of the oppressed and downtrodden peoples for fulfillment and equality. Writers such as Wright and Ellison were fascinated with the concept at some point in their lives, although both authors later abandoned it. Marxist-influenced literatures concentrate on class conflicts in the economic sphere of human activities, particularly aspects which have historically involved men more than women. Also, according to Marxist theory, problems of racial and gender discrimination can only be understood as effects of Capitalism and its structure of economic exploitation by class. Marxism as an all-informing philosophy holds that:

> *The idea of class struggle is central; the connections between literature and the economic structure of society in which it was written must be made evident (Peck & Coyle, 1993:76).*

These issues should be taken seriously in the criticism of *Native Son, Black Boy and Invisible Man.* Feminists are, however, very sceptical of the brand of Marxism and Christian Existentialism which regularly affirm male superiority in literary works. Hence, they reject them, as they maintain that these ideologies propagate male domination or exploitation of women which feminists endeavour to challenge and expose. Feminists seek to replace that old order with a new set of values which they hope would serve as an alternative that is capable of righting the wrongs they perceive. But, this is exactly where the problem arises. In their attempt to devise and propagate a suitable alternative to the prevailing system, they have often veered towards extreme positions that run contrary to the ideals of true art. Extreme feminist positions have given impetus to the womanists who prefer productive dialogue with their male counterparts in order to foster unity, progress and wholeness of the human society.

The uncompromising stance on some issues by this category of feminists has given an impetus to the womanists, who are perceived to desire a comprehensive and productive dialogue on all areas of human activities with their male counterparts so as to foster unity, progress and wholeness of the human society. Hence, Walker challenges white feminist assessment of issues and proffers womanism as an alternative to their brand of feminism. In her 1978 essay, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)", she emphasises what she regards as the twin 'afflictions' of her life:

> *That white feminists as well as some Black people deny the Black woman her womanhood - that they define issues in terms of Blacks on one hand, women (meaning white women) on the other. They miss the obvious fact - that Black People come in both sexes (Barbara Christian in Mari Evans, ed. 1984).*

From this it is clear that Alice Walker views white feminism as compounding the old problem of white racism, defining a womanist as a "black feminist whose readings reflect the present, when the process of confusion, resistance to the established order, and the discovery of a freeing order is, especially for women, a prerequisite for growth" (468). She further argues that, "although she (Walker) speaks from the point of view of sisterhood with all women... all women must understand that sexism and racism in America are critically related (469). This then informs her opposition to white feminism.

Womanism is an arm of the feminist movement specially formulated by black women in America to actualise their dreams of equal opportunity and fulfillment in life. The whole endeavour of reassessing and redefining female character portrayal in writings by black males is therefore viewed in the context of the quest for fulfillment by black women in the United States. As the women-centred critics reappraise creative works of black male writers, their efforts are equally being examined by other critics and scholars. This fits in with the practice of deconstruction which envisages limitless interpretations of phenomena.

An exploration of some of the texts of black male writers accused of dented depiction of women reveals that, although the women-centred critics are accurate in many of their assessments, the male writers too have established an ethos and created a legacy by contributing to the blossoming of the African-American literary tradition in the midst of the predominant, hostile white tradition in the United States. Thus, by writing, the male authors have made a significant contribution from which other scholars and critics are drawing. It has become imperative to analyse the quest for fulfillment by black females in America in texts written by black American male writers, which are usually condemned by extreme feminists for poor black representation in order to demonstrate how black females strive relentlessly to redefine themselves as they grapple with problems in the society. Emphasis is shifted from a criticism of the male writers and a repudiation of the women-centred criticisms, to a preoccupation with something more life-affirming and beneficial to both genders in the debate. The womanists, by pointing to aspects of feminism "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female", are by implication, deconstructing traditional western feminism.

At the time Hughes, Wright, Ellison and Baldwin wrote their masterpieces, black people in the United States were generally preoccupied with warding off racism and other forms of humiliation and oppression visited on them by whites. The generic name for human beings then tended to be "man", "mankind", "manhood". Calvin Hernton (1987) argues:

> *Historically, the battle line of the racial struggle in the United States has been drawn exclusively as a struggle between the men of the races ... The central concept and the universal metaphor around which all aspects of the racial situation revolve is 'Manhood'.* (38)

In that era too, the theme of social protest was central to writings by black male authors. Gender issues appeared to be peripheral in the American society. In what became known later as the manifesto for black writers, Langston Hughes made racial uplift (which is an aspect of social protest) the central theme in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

> *We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased - we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure does not matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves* (*Hughes, 1969:12*).

At the time Hughes made this declaration (though it embraced both genders), it would have been counter-productive to divert attention from the black people's struggle for recognition and equality in the predominantly white American society to gender differences and other related issues between male and female African-Americans. This is not to imply, however, that the struggle against racial injustices is an excuse for black (or white) men to dominate or oppress black (or white) women. The point to note is that African-American people were just emerging from almost three centuries of severe slavery. Coloured people were just beginning to unfetter and enletter themselves, since: "During 250 years of slavery, it was a legal crime for blacks to read and write" (37).

Hughes's manifesto, however, was all-embracing and vividly reflected the ideals of womanism, especially with its emphasis on mutual or joint endeavours which foster the well-being of all. Barbara Christian (*Gates, 1990*) is encouraged by black male writers such as Hughes who strive to balance their portrayals of people and issues. She believes that Hughes and his likes have motivated black women to speak and act because they seek to establish a tradition which, while not discriminating against males, reflects their genuine aspirations and sensibilities as black females. This view is completely in consonance with Alice Walker's womanistic goals:

> *For those of us who came out of the sixties, the vision of women moving all over the world was not solely a claiming of our rights but also the rights of all those who had been denied their humanity ... We were now able to speak and to listen to each other, to hear our own language, to refine and critique it across time and space, through the written word. For me, that dialogue is the kernel of what a black feminist literary critic tries to do. We listen to those of us who speak, write, read, to those who have written, to those who may write. We write to those who write, read, speak, may write, and we try to hear the*

> *voiceless. We are participants in a many-voiced palaver of thought-feeling, image/language that moves us to move-toward a world where, like Alice Walker's revolutionary petunias, all of us can bloom. We found that in order to move beyond prescribed categories we had to "rememory" - reconstruct our past.* (48)

The discourse unfolding here is borne out of the dissatisfaction and frustration of women-centred critics over representations of black females in some black male-authored texts and this accounts for their great emphasis on the evolution of a feminist literary tradition within the African-American literary tradition which is currently viewed as pro-male. As the critics express disaffection with such writings, they are inadevertently aspiring for greater uplift, while at the same time, prescribing for future writers. But such 'prescription' is subject to further readings - a function of deconstruction. This of course further propagates the intellectual process since deconstruction implies multifarious interpretations. Christian therefore feels free to apply new interpretations to old phenomena in order to justify her faith in the promise of womanism. This is in essence a subversion of western feminism which she terms "Western philosophical theorizing." Such revisioning is literary as well as political since it is subversive. The feminist orientation which she is at variance with, originally set out to fight for the rights of all women, but focused rather exclusively on matters affecting white women. Hence her acceptance of womanism as a positive alternative to traditional feminism. Womanism, in her estimation, empowers black females to realise their potentials much more than western feminism. She justifies her conviction by observing that:

> *Because language is one (though not the only) way to express what one knows, feels, even when one doesn't know one/knows it, because story-telling is a dynamic form of remembering/recreating, we found that it was often in the relationship between literatures and the world that revisioning occurred; it is often in the poem, the story, the play, rather than in Western philosophical theorizing, that feminist thought/feeling evolves, challenges, and renews itself... It has often been through our literatures that women have renamed critical areas of human life: mothering, sexuality, bodies, friendship, spirituality, economics, the process of literature itself.* (49)

The renewed interest in women's studies exhibited by black females has led analysts to conclude that a new form of scholarship is emerging. This scholarship matches the writer with his/her texts as a way to appraise the practicability of such a writer's newly emerging concepts. It does not treat the text in abeyance of the writer. The interest has also been attributed to a 'gravitation' which is perceived to have occurred. This is already yielding positive dividends:

> *As a result of that gravitation, we have moved to excavate the past and restore to ourselves the words of many of our foremothers who were buried in the rumble of distorted hisory. We have questioned the idea of great works of literature, preferences clearly detemined by a powerful elite. We have asked why some forms are not considered literature.* (49)

In "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creavity," Michele Wallace *(Gates, 1990)* argues that black feminist creativity (which includes criticism) emanated from the fact of the non-recognition of black women's contribution to literature and the arts by the dominant male prone establishment in the United States. She further reasons that:

> *Prevented from assuming a commensurable role in critical theory and the production of knowledge by a combination of external and internal pressures, it is confined to the aesthetic and the commercial. To compensate for the ghettoization, black feminist creativity's concentration in music and now literature has become provocatively intense. And yet it is still difficult, even for those who study this music and literature, to apprehend black feminist creativity as a continuous and coherent discourse.* (55)

Wallace's anxieties and fears need to be allayed because, since its inception, the concept of womanism has been embraced by more and more black women scholars and critics to try to solve the twin problems of male domination of women and the limitations of traditional western feminism. Womanism, like western feminism proceeds by attacking the status-quo in order to destroy it so as to erect new structures favourable to women. But, unlike feminism, womanist inquiry creates ample room for mutually benefiting dialogue.

It has generally been argued that black women were accorded poor representations in literary writings by African-American males. Some women-centred critics go as far as alleging that black females were completely left out by these writers in some of their works. Accordingly, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were cited to buttress the allegation. And, a scrutiny of the male-authored writings reveals that many of the accusations are valid. It is also worthy to note at this point that Wright and Ellison are only two African-American male writers, so it might therefore appear mischievous to generalise from their creative efforts. But, they form the core of the black literary canon in the United States! However, the analysis here is not trying to aggravate the situation further by allotting blames and praises. The aim here is to assess womanist inquiry as a possible panacea to the problem of representation (or misrpresentation) of black women in texts written by black men. It is equally germane to draw attention to the fact that other factors actively influenced the writers so listed at the period they wrote. Moreover, other very renowned black male writers such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes who are equally central to the African-

American literary canon are appraised for greater objectivity on the matter. So, is womanism an all-encompasing antidote to the issue of poor or improper representation of women by men in African-American Literature? In other words, is womanist inquiry really the answer to the alleged domination of women by men [using selected literary texts as our basis or reference points]?

Prior to her enunciation of the concept of womanism, Alice Walker became acutely aware of her "diminutive individual self" as an African-American woman writer in the gendered and racially-inclined American society. She consequently wrote a poem, "On Stripping Bark from Myself", to reflect her new awareness:

> *I find my own/small person/astanding self/against the World/an equality of wills/I finally understand (Walker, 1979:23).*

The realisation of herself as a woman and as a black writer in a fiercely discriminating society where individuality (as opposed to communality) prevails, helped to raise this consciousness in her. To counter this apparent western tendency (individuality), Walker initiated a community (and by extension) African-based concept which she subsequently referred to as "Womanist". This terminology is now synonymous with a "black feminist or feminist of color" *(Walker, 1984:xi)*.

The Womanist inquiry is therefore well-equipped to contend with, and resolve the issues of black male writers' misrepresentations and, occasionally, total exclusion of black females in their texts. This conclusion is premised on the fact that the framework of womanism projects itself in a dynamic, all-embracing, and compromising mode. These attributes contrast sharply with the stance of traditional western feminism which is often seen to be exclusive and discriminatory by non-white and non-western feminists. More importantly, the key distinguishing factor in the Womanist Orientation appears to be its ultimate goal of fostering unity between men and women, holding dialogue to settle lingering points of contention in order to build trust and ensure community in the real [practical] sense. Thus womanism promotes the advancement of women in the intellectual and non-intellectual circles, while recognising the inseparable bond between women and men. Its approach to problems such as the controversial portrayals of black women in literary works by black male writers is simply to draw attention to such issues, support the instances with convincing evidence[s], suggest possible remedies which include the desire to engage the male-folk [writers and critics alike] in mutually rewarding dialogue[s] so as to sort out the problems and proceed subsequently in joint, whole community-affirming endeavours. Such an approach, no doubt, manifests wisdom and responsibility and is worth encouraging in our crises-ridden world.

Womanist practice is however not entirely bereft of the confrontation and subversion common in traditional feminism. Sherley Anne Williams *(Gates, 1990)* admits that womanism:

> *Is as much bolekaja criticism as "feminist" theory, for black women writers have been urging black men not so much to "come down (and) fight," as to come down and talk, even before Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike coined a critical term to describe our challenge.* (69)

Whereas Wright and Ellison are criticised for according fleeting and superficial depictions to black women such as Mrs. Thomas, Bessie Mears (*Native Son)* and Mary Rambo (*Invisible Man*), Baldwin and Hughes are commended by all shades of feminists for projecting African-American females like Elizabeth Grimes (*Go tell It on the Mountain*) and Aunt Hager Williams (*Not Without Laughter*) positively because they delved into details about these characters and displayed remarkable understanding of the activities and peculiar nature of the black females in their portrayals.

Wright and Ellison are further accused of focusing exclusively in projecting male heroes and protagonists in their texts (Hernton, 1987). On the other hand, Baldwin and Hughes (although they too reflected male protagonists in their writings) are praised for placing these central characters squarely under the positive influence and protecting hands of black women who, as mothers and grandmothers, nurture and guide the heroes to positive ends. Womanism's chief desire regarding all categories of male writers appears therefore to be to encourage them to be more objective in their representations of characters and events and to strive to bring to bear in their creativity the unique features and sensibilities of the black woman. This study views all such efforts by womanists as a dimension of the quest for fulfillment by black females in the United States.

Finally, womanist inquiry, with its promise of greater objectivity and sense of community, should (unlike Western feminism) be able to assess the black woman projected in texts by pioneering black male writers as starting points for subsequent creative efforts. In every pioneering endeavour, there are normally lapses and shortcomings. So, as this category of women's studies seeks to redefine the image and role of the African-American female in these texts, it should place more emphasis on the positive promise possessed by these women rather than the limitations imposed on them by their society or by the male writers.

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