

Representation of African-American Male Characters in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Love*

Pritha Mukherjee

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Department of English, SOE,
Presidency University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Dr.Venkata Ramani. Challa

Professor of English, Director (School of Social Sciences & Humanities
CMR University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Abstract

Racism has been a pertinent conversation in African American community. Discrimination and exploitation of black Americans have been generally viewed from a male perspective and often such men, and sometimes rightfully so, are seen as victims. However, often the stories of abuse, oppression, subjugation, and gaslighting by African American men are concealed. African American women have been at the receiving end of intersectional discrimination for a long. This study explores how Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Love* represent black masculinity. These two canonical texts cannot be accused of stereotyping African American men as they show a wide range of male characters. This provides validation to the representations of African American men in the texts that are contextualized in diverse political, historical, and socio-economic times. The discrimination, humiliation, and indignity they suffered at the hands of their white male counterparts have often been an excuse and justification for their actions. To evade conversations on their attitude towards black women, in fear of being accused of stereotyping, is doing grave injustice to the women.

Keywords- African American men, African American women, authenticity, discrimination, patriarchy, representation, stereotypes.

1. Introduction

The African American men, dismissed by the white authorities as incapable, inept, and inferior, often asserted their masculinity in ways that were quite damaging to the physical and mental beings of the women. Domestic violence, battering, rape, sexist presumptions, and manipulations were common aspects of African American community. The attempt has been to underplay such practices and to submerge the prevalent stereotypes. In the sexual harassment case filed by Anita Hill against Judge Clarence Thomas and the Mike Tyson trial, the protection of the perpetrators' reputation, due to their class, position, and power was evident. Thus, accusing African American men, due to the negative stereotypes attached to them became a counter-narrative to such abuses against women. The victimization of women has often been ignored or suppressed to negate the violent images of African American men. Domestic violence, gas-lighting, abuse in intimate spaces, and multiple, intersectional oppressions have been a perpetual presence in the lives of most African American women. Not disregarding the bias in these narrow assumptions, it has often been seen that starting from the political and civil rights movements, the African American community has essentially propagated a patriarchal and sexist narrative.

2. African American men in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Black feminists know that African American women must address the issues of sexism and must also address poverty since for African American women it is very much associated with gender as statistics show that African American women are at the bottom of the economic totem pole. (Johnson-Bailey, 95).

Thus, the impending danger from both within and outside the community put these women in very vulnerable positions. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford, though a spirited woman finds her dignity and self-respect compromised in her marriage to Joe Stark. Joe Stark is no criminal or a victim of substance abuse. He is a man of considerable social position. As a mayor, Joe Stark exudes power and control. Joe treats Janie as a trophy wife. He is the quintessential entitled, successful, wealthy African American man, a black replica of the white sexist American man. Joe's insecurity is evident in his repeated attempts to

control Janie. He stifles Janie's emotional; and psychological growth and forces her to remain invisible to others.

If Logan intended to make a mule out of Janie, Mr. Starks strives to make her a puppet. Disregarding, her individuality and her spiritedness, Joe Starks tries to smother Janie's confidence and self-respect. He does not hesitate to age- shame her and question her integrity.

Joe is very much like many of the other authority figures encountered in American political texts since Henry Adams's *Democracy*. Hurston, it appears, is slyly critiquing the figure of authority that some white and black novelists rather uncritically promote. Although there are intimations that Joe has had a difficult life filled with labor, his supreme confidence and seemingly natural political ability allow him relatively easy access to power: He becomes the unquestioned leader of Eatonville overnight. (Simmons, 183)

If Joe Starks is the product of capitalism and its socio-economic exploitation, then Logan Killicks is a representative of the agricultural economic structure. Logan looks at marriage as a convenient source of another hand to help him in his work in the fields. Janie foresees the lack of possibility of anything good coming out of this union. Logan does not even consider love or affection as important aspects to be considered in this marriage, As Janie's grandmother warns her to be more grounded and realistic with her anticipations and be grateful for acquiring a husband, who could provide her a secure life. It does not occur to her that Logan was not seeking a wife but a fellow laborer, a mule to help him prosper in enriching the land.

Tea Cake arguably is the more egalitarian representation of African American males. Younger by many years, with dubious economic standing, Tea-Cake is no apparent threat to Janie's desire to live her life on her terms. This relationship brings out the youthful side of Janie, who had surrendered her younger days in battling against prejudices, discrimination, sexism, and oppression. Here was a young man from nowhere with next to nothing social positioning, but who encourages Janie to be herself. Their marriage was the closest to a relationship of equality that Janie had ever experienced. Hurston does not fall into the trap of creating a nearly perfect young male representative of African American origin to counter the two other representations of the narrative. On the contrary, Tea Cake's occasional resort to violence and his insecurities add authenticity to the representation of African American men of flesh and blood.

3. African American men in Toni Morrison's *Love*

The world of Bill Cosey was a black imitation of the larger white world looming large. This world was no kinder than the other, especially for the women. Cosey's debauchery and perversion were evident both in his business and personal space. Through his business acumen and the success of his enterprises were lauded by the community, there have been speculations and questions regarding the same. However, none of the above is as disturbing as Bill Cosey's attitude toward women. Bill Cosey is a classic representation of African American hyper-masculinity. He treats the women around him as mere pawns. The women serve no purpose to him beyond his sexual appetite. He controls the lives of every woman around him, including his granddaughter Christine and his daughter-in-law May. These women know of no existence beyond Bill Cosey's manipulative world.

The atrocity of Bill Cosey's act comes out strongly as we are taken back to 1940. We see two little girls innocently playing at the beach, enjoying their packed picnic lunch in the privacy of their conjured Celestial Palace. We are shocked to experience the fifty-plus Bill Cosey sexually touching an eleven-year-old Heed, who happens to be his granddaughter Christine's best friend. Heed experiences something terrible for her to articulate, even to her bosom friend Christine. The latter, unwittingly, becomes a witness to her grandfather masturbating after his paedophilic success. This is followed by a marriage of convenience between Bill Cosey and Heed, destroying the friendship between the two young girls.

Cosey is a predator, who sees women, including a little girl as old as his granddaughter as prey. African American women were the easiest prey, as they were oppressed by racism, sexism, classism, and the economy. Cosey's sense of entitlement has its roots in the sexist and patriarchy-infused African American community.

Patriarchy, of course, applies to White men and African American men alike. Patriarchy entails a set of hierarchical social relations among men which allows for the control of women. It does not matter whether the man wielding the power is the same or a different color. Closely interwoven with the idea of patriarchy is the notion that the White woman also has a role in capitalism that again contributes to the imbalance of concerns between White and African American women. Capitalism specifically recruits and creates its workers among African Americans and other people of color. (Johnson-Bailey,95).

Bill Cosey and Joe do not have to put in much effort to establish their position of authority. The white men paved the way for powerful African American men to follow. It is pay-back time for African American men. For all the humiliation, discrimination, and social emasculation, African American men have finally come to assert themselves. Ironically, the victims of their rage are not the white men, but the vulnerable, powerless, and poor African American women. Morrison succeeded in following in the footsteps of his literary predecessor Hurston, by not stopping at showing an immoral, domineering, patriarchal successful African American male. She moved beyond, successfully countering any allegations of stereotyping African American men in literary works by women writers.

Romen is an interesting young African American young man. Working closely in the ambiance where the spirit of Bill Cosey loomed largely, the latter's influence on Romen cannot be disregarded. Romen is brought up by his grandparents, who happen to have worked and been acquainted with Cosey. Romen is two minds about his position in the world that he lives in. The hypermasculine promptings by his male gang provoke him to take the plunge and give in to the conditioning of taking advantage of the helpless. The voices hooting him for not becoming a part of the gang rape are difficult to ignore. But the inner prick of the conscience, which is an extension of his upbringing was not weak either. His informed choice of opting out of the heinous act of gangraping a poor, miserable, vulnerable young black girl, however, does not give him the confidence to stand up to the catcalls by his fellow mates, nudging him to finish the undone job. As a representation of the lascivious, sexually hungry, domineering sexist voice, of the African American male, he faltered when he became less of a 'man' in the eyes of society. His incapacity to treat the vulnerable young little black girl brutally, only makes him contemptuous towards her and of course himself. And 'he couldn't stand the sight of her. If she thanked him, he would strangle her' (Morrison, 30).

Romen's relationship with Junior is in many ways a contrast to the relationships that Bill Cosey had with his women. Starting on a volatile sexual note, Romen succeeds in generating tender emotions in Junior through his 'healing' touch. Roman shows high morale when he decides to save the old ladies in the dilapidated resort than give in to Junior's selfish needs.

The goodness that Romen displays are evidently because of the decent upbringing of Sandler and his wife. Sandler questions Cosey's promiscuous conduct and feels uncomfortable when the latter speaks about women as objects of sexual pleasure. However,

Sandler, himself cannot boast of righteousness. His objectification of Junior, when they meet for the first time, again reinstates the precarious condition of the African American women in a community of the 'male gaze.

4. Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Love* display authentic representations of African American male characters. The male characters in both works attempt to treat the women with no respect. The men consider women sometimes as objects of desire, sometimes as an aid in their work (not by the consent of the women), at times as victims of intimate partner abuse and most certainly as inferior being to to be oppressed and controlled. Very few of them rise above such conventions. However, in both the novels, there are exceptions or exceptional traits in some male characters that authenticate the representation of male characters in the works beyond prejudice and stereotypes.

References

- Aymer, S. R. (2012). A Case for Including the "Lived Experience" of African American Men in Batterers' treatment". *Journal of African American Studies*, 15(3), 352–366.
- Burke, A. W. (1984). Is racism a causatory factor in mental illness? *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 30: 1-3
- Fernando, S. (1984). Racism as a cause of depression. *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 30: 41- 49
- Gordon, E. T., Gordon, E. W., & Nembhard, J. G. G. (1994). Social Science Literature Concerning African American Men. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 63(4), 508. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2967292>
- Harack, K. (2013). 'Not Even in the Language They Had Invented for Secrets': Trauma, Memory, and Re- Witnessing in Toni Morrison's *Love*. *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 66(2), 255–278.
- Hurston, Z.N. (2018). *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Virago Press.

- Johnson -Bailey, Juanita. "Everyday Perspectives on Feminism: African American Women Speak Out." *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2003, pp. 82–99. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675089>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.
- King, D. K. (1988). Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology. *Signs*, 14(1), 42–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174661>
- McGowan, T. (1999). Liberation and Domination: Their Eyes Were Watching God and the Evolution of Capitalism. *MELUS*, 24(1), 109–128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467909>
- Mellard, J. M. (2010). Unimaginable Acts Imagined: Fathers, Family Myth, and the Postmodern Crisis of Paternal Authority in Toni Morrison's 'Love. ' ' ' *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 63(2), 233–267.
- Morrison, T. *Love*. (2003). Vintage U.K. Random House
- Pettigrew, T. (2015). Allport, Gordon. 10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.61001-2.
- Simmons, R. (2002). "The Hierarchy Itself": Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority. *African American Review*, 36(2), 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512254>
- Thomas, A. (2007). Aggression in African American Males: A Review of Selected Literature on Environmental Influence. *Challenge*. 13. 29-38.
- Utsey, S. O. (1997). Racism and the psychological well-being of African American men. *Journal of African American Men*, 3(1), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-997-1011-1>
- Wyatt, J. (2008). Love's Time and the Reader: Ethical Effects of 'Nachträglichkeit' in Toni Morrison's 'Love. ' ' ' *Narrative*, 16(2), 193–221.