

## An Iconographic Landscape of Black in the Mainstream of American Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** While analyzing an iconographic landscape of Black in the mainstream of American literature, the article makes a survey of the images of black, which have been projected in the mainstream of American literature. As Blacks were the people who lived in a country that is essentially racist, they tried to define themselves in relation to the white American standards and see 'zero images' of themselves. In the mind of the Americans the black has become more a formula than a human being, something to be argued down, condemned, kept down, harassed, patronized, worried over and a social burden. It is necessary to explore how the black writers reconstructed their lives from derogatory images portrayed by the white writers. As slaves of slaves, the black women's struggle for survival and liberation has been won against the dual tradition of racism and sexism. They have protested against racial and gender discrimination.

**KEYWORDS:** Iconographic landscape; Zero images; Protest against racial and gender discrimination; Literary stereotyping of blacks.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Malignant web of images myths and stereotypes was created about the blacks, so as to hold them in psychological bondage and mental slavery. The slaves worked often as long as they could see. Even the songs of the slaves represent their sorrows rather than joy. Slavery was to them the dark triumphs of evil over them. Their heart was filled with spirit of revenge and revolt. In the mind of the Americans the black has become more a formula than a human being, something to be argued down, condemned, kept down, harassed, patronized, worried over and a social burden. Treatment of the slaves was dehumanizing. Disease and pestilence killed slaves by the dozens on any single ship. In danger of becoming slaves many blacks leaped into the sea, and kept under water till they were drawn; to avoid being taken up as slaves. As black men suffered women also were victims of slavery. Black women were used by the officers on the ship. Alexander Falconbridge who served as a ships surgeon abroad and who was an English slave trader, while counting his experience comments: The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses, as disgrace human nature. (Falconbridge 1978: 23)

Slaves were sold in auctions blocks. Their families were shattered. A daughter was torn from a weeping mother. A child was wrested from parents and a wife from a loving husband. They had to undergo sheer agony and torture. Their children had no education. Rather, for the whole life they had to strengthen their muscles to fit them for the work of a slave. One former slave recalled her life in bondage:

I never knowed what it was to rest. I just work all de time from morning till late at night. I had to do everything day was to do on de outside. Work in de field, chop wood, here corn, till sometimes I feels like my back surety break...Ole marse stop if we did anything he didn't like. Sometimes he get his dander up we dassent look around of him, else he tie you hards afore your body and whip you, just like a mule... In de summer we had to work outdoors in de winter in de house. I had to card and spin till ten O' clock. Never get much rest, had to get up at four de next morning and start again (Hymowitz 1978: 43).

The tendencies of thievishness, laziness, and vanity were labeled on them. It was the rule that a black must be kept in his place which was subordinate industrially, politically and socially. After the Civil War number of blacks increased. In the 1890's due to the fear of rural white lynch mob, and attracted jobs the migration of the blacks to the north began. Though it was so, new arrivals were not welcomed with open arms. It did not affect much to their depressed life. On the contrary, life in the inner cities was rough. Conditions were unhealthy, ghetto life seriously jeopardized family stability, male-unemployment often surpassed female levels and marital relationships were strained in the male-dominated society. Though black women got wages, they got it on domestic scale. There was no life and no respect for the blacks. A black was never addressed as 'Mister' but as John or Joseph. Progress was there but without social equality. Andre Siegfried a French economist,

historian and journalist at his tour to United States in 1898-1920 gave an eyewitness account of the Negro life, while talking about their social inequality Ander Siegfried observes:

Are we not men? The best of them will ask 'We are conscious of our merits', why should we be treated as infectious pariahs? Of even worse as if we did not exist? (Siegfried 1978: 120)

In white literature the Negro was depicted as a mere stereotype than human being. He was a mere formula. His image in white literature was depicted as ignorant, shiftless and immoral. He was pictured as savage stranger, comic peasant, scapegoat, bogey, or pariah. A critic Sterling Brown shows that the bulk of American literature had tightly restricted the Negro figure as contented slave, Brown states that "The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life" (Gross 1966 : 10).

Black man's identity was completely socialized out of existence through the images, myths and stereotypes focus on race. He is portrayed as subhuman, Rambo, Sambo, Uncle Tom, Orangutans. By the end of the eighteenth century, blacks had been sketchily presented in the British literature, and the same model was followed by the American writers. The white ideology paralyzed the consciousness of the blacks. Ralph Ellison while commenting on how the white writers depicted the Negroes observes:

Twain for historical perspective and as an example of how a great nineteenth-century, writer handled the Negro, Hemingway as the prime example of the artist who ignored the dramatic and symbolic possibilities presented by this theme; and Faulkner as an example of a writer who has confronted Negroes with such mixed motive that he has presented them in terms of both the 'good nigger' and 'bad nigger' stereotype and who yet has explored perhaps more successfully than anyone else, either white or black, certain forms of Negro humanity. (Ellison 1966:47)

The very first presentation of the black is that of a loyal old black servant. In 1820s black is presented as an old family servant in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Spy* (1821) which is one of the pioneers of the American novel. Between 1820 and 1830 the blacks became exceedingly significant from an economic standpoint. They began to make conscious effort towards freedom. George Tucker in his novel *The Valley of the Shenandoah* (1824) presents dual attitude towards blacks. On one hand he depicts slave and black man as unhappy and unfortunate, on the other, he depicts black man as faithful. John P. Kennedy in his fiction *Swallow Bum* (1832), *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (1835), *Rob of the Bowl* (1838) focuses on the plantation life of the blacks. Gradually the depiction of the Black took a turn but with limitations. Mrs. Caroline Howard Gilman, in her novel *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1836) portrays detail information concerning black life. A. B. Longstreet in *Georgia Sense* (1835) shows admirable understanding to psychology but his portrayal does not move beyond a servant. William Gilmore Simms in his fiction *The Yemassee* (1835) portrayed the black slave but he was kept under control, in the texts the slave denied freedom to show his loyalty. By 1835, the personal appearances of the blackest types were described but black psychology remained untouched. Until the time the blacks portrayed so far, could express the characteristics like his pessimism his irresponsibility. No novel focused on his power which could show his rebelliousness, his amazing power of adaptation which enabled him to find happiness, in adverse conditions. It was in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared with the note of pathos, which the black carried within himself. It was not surprising that 3,000 copies of the novel were sold on the day of its publication and 3, 00,000 in the first year. Mrs. Stowe is the first American novelist to center her attention on the lowly and lonely life of black race. The horrors of slavery are described in the book. Joel Chandler Harris, in his novels shares fear, laughter and anger of black; he tried to reconstruct the damaged self of black but with less sympathy. In his reconstruction novel *Gabriel Tolliver* (1902) he cannot completely sympathies with the blacks. Thomas Nelson Page in his *Red Rock* (1909) and *Red Rider* (1924) pictures them as 'wretched' and 'brute' blacks. In Tourgee's fiction they are outcasts independent but are deprived of freedom. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1883) the character Huck moves out in search of freedom, his Pudd'nhead Wilson is a diagrammatic study in the black and white. William Faulkner tried to discover the relations of the black and white in his texts. In Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, the white man and the black, who love and destroy each other, are sons of the same father. The images in the novel concern about slavery and black revenge. His characters in *Sound and Fury* express social problems the blacks were depicted by the white writers but there was racial attitude in their depiction. George Washington Cable's novel, *The Grandiosities* (1880) depicts selfishness and slavery but with white supremacy. Black in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) is depicted with social bias. White writers had no prominent intention to depict the Black positivity. Even they did not want to improve it; they tried to present the real pictures of blacks. Twain represented blacks for historical perspective. Hemingway ignored the dramatic and symbolic possibilities. Faulkner represented Blacks with mixed motive. He represented them in terms of both 'good' and the 'bad'. In their works white writers treated blacks as a social problem and not a personal and human one. Gross Seymour, (1966: 2) while commenting on the degraded images of the blacks in American literature states: "for the study of the Negro in American literature seems to indicate that he has been depicted more as a stereotype than as a human being."

In the white world to think of him was to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustice and violence, the way they were thought, the way they were defined, their images were portrayed negatively by the white writers. While commenting on the portrayal of black images in white literature, Blyden Jackson (1965: 90) expresses: "To an overwhelming degree the Universe of Negro fiction is panoramic, not dramatic. It is a still picture, the unchanging back drop in which actors are paraded to show how fixed is a setting which should be, but has not, altered its essential feature."

Following are the characteristics stamped on the blacks. His irresponsible spirit, his incomplete absorption in the present moment, his intense superstitiousness, and his freedom from resentment were presented. Blacks were portrayed as honest slaves who saved their master's lives. In heroic mood they appeared artificial, and in the less ambitious moments only they appeared real. The white writers did not portray a lifelike image of the black. His image was described as a useful puppet. He was always treated in literature with secondary importance. In the struggle also black image suffered heavily. He was not portrayed as a normal human being but a strange creature. He was nothing not a living argument. Black characters rarely appeared as heroes. They have continued to be important minor characters. He was nothing more than a formula. He was depicted as ignorant, indignant, shiftless, and immoral. It was the responsibility of the black writers to correct the false images of the race depicted in white literature. The white literature was predominated by the negative images of the blacks in order to show them subhuman. The degraded black selves were deeply rooted in the white psychology. Commenting on their damaged portrayal by white writers, Ralph Ellison states:

Too often what is presented as the American Negro (a most complex example of Western man) emerges an over Signified clown, a beast or an angel. Seldom is he drawn as that sensitively, focused processes of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality which great literary art has projected the image of man. (Ellison 1966: 116)

Ellison (1966 : 129) adds: "Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized irrational forces of American life, process through which, by projecting the misforms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America."

Thus in the opinion of the black critics the literary stereotyping of blacks was nothing but their psychological lynching. It is Paul Laurence Dunbar in his *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) treated black life seriously and at length. He projected the image of homesick demoralized black in the urban North, W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-coloured Man* and in many more writings the traditional black selves were changed. By the mid-twenties, when the resistance movement began, stereotyped characterizations were being voiced by black critics. Larry Neal in the essay 'The Black Arts Movement' comments:

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical recording of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. (Neal 1971: 272)

James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* represent the modern criticism of the blacks in American literature. Langston Hughes articulated the new revolutionary image of the black by placing him on the solid ground of the daily working class struggle. Langston Hughes' *Nigger Heaven* gives a turn to black selves. Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) is about Emma Lou Morgan whose black skin alienates her from a light skinned family and from her classmates of the university. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* speaks about a search for a primary existential sense of himself. James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on The Mountain* and *The Amen Corner* represent a search for roots, surrender to tradition, and an acceptance of their past. All of them reveal the black experience in America. Richard Wright with his *Native Son* became the most eloquent spokesman of the blacks, *Bigger* in the *Native Son* became a social symbol. The novel reflects the isolation of the black within his own group and the resulting fury of his impatient corn. But the characters of the blacks represented by the black male writers spoke solely for themselves. They wanted to know their own identity. It was a kind of search they made for themselves.

Though the African American male writers tried to define the male characters, they tried to define their self-concept, they tried to search their own identity, and the women always remained secondary. Calvin Hernton, regarding the condition of black woman comments:

Just as white people have created and maintained a racist culture, so have (black) men created, maintained a sexist culture. Racist culture teaches all whites to be racist in some manner or the other. In and through an elaborate system of masculine versus feminine gender imperatives sexist culture socializes all men to be sexist. (Hernton 1990: 10)

In the white world there was any damage caused to black womanhood, anything that paralyzed her psyche that is seem less web of misconceptions, myths, images and stereotypes. It left her mind in a confused state, in racist, sexist and capitalistic America. Jacqueline Jackson (Higginbotham 1982: 94) comments that the

lives of “Blacks women, the most disadvantaged group in the United states... Have been ‘messed over’ by distorters of reality...”

Stereotypes, myths and images functioned as ideological weapon which transformed the consciousness of a black person. It produced a kind of dark ‘ideological environment’ which held the oppressed in a psychological bondage. It made to avoid the complexities and contradictions of human life and made no difference between individual and individual. The stereotypes and images even denied believing that human life possessed a kind of dignity. The imposed images snatch the power of a person and he loses the capacity of define himself.

Black woman being the member of oppressed group was being looked upon as the derogatory. The degraded images made her to forget her consciousness. The denial of blackness and acceptance of white values are repeatedly reflected in the works of Ann Petry, Nella Larsen, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall. The works reflect how by denying black culture black woman sees ‘zero image’ of herself.

There are black male characters Portrayed either migrated, run away, escapists and psychopaths, i. e. Milkman Dead in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* Dighton Boyce in Marshall’s *Brown girl*, Grange Copeland In Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Here the black men fly and leave behind their women and children to their cruel fate. The myth of black matriarchy condemned black women for the strength they showed under the most hostile conditions. Instead of praised they were looked down for the strength they showed. The independent role which the black women were forced to play in labor force and in the family had a negative impact on black men’s consciousness.

The African American women were the victims of the fragmented selves i.e. sexual and non-sexual; she was oppressed as minority and as woman. Regarding her image, she functioned as a symbol of racial difference and the usual receptacle of misogyny. She was the nag of white society and also the destroyer of the race. The African American women were humiliated and crushed because they made mistake of being born both black and female in the white man’s country. In the slave narratives, the myth of the bad black woman is considered. Elizabeth Schultz writes:

The historical account of this abuse is best given by slave narratives. They document how the black woman was used as a ‘breeder’ and an outer for the white man’s sexual needs; they document how she was subjected to public fondling and exposed naked on the auction block. The narratives reveal that she lived in fear of these abuses and only occasionally could succeed in resisting them. (Schultz 1977: 328)

A reading of black male literature unveils the treatment of black male writers provided to their women. They are always inferiors and less important than the male characters. They are portrayed as evil, castrators, wrenches, immoral beings, repelled and if possible, even destroyed. They portrayed black women as sex-object of an extension of male ego with no status of their own.

The above discourse reveals that the black male novelists have been systematically derogatory in their treatment of black women. Like their white counterparts, the black male novelists appear to be firm believers of the puritan Christian ideology that life is a continual moral struggle and that woman is frail creature and, therefore, morally fallen and inferior, she is worthy of condemnation. That is why; she must be regenerated, reborn and made respectable for social acceptance only through men. ‘Black men are primary and sacred and women are secondary and profane...That they, not women, are the primary target of the white men’s oppressive system’ (Hernton 1990: 47). The myths, images and stereotypes which black men held about black women were as degrading and dehumanizing as images perpetuated by white people.

Traditionally, the world of black literature in the United States has been a world of black men’s literature. The fathers and purveyors of black writings have been men and the male authors have portrayed male heroes, male protagonists. Their complexity and vitality of the black female experience have been fundamentally ignored by the black writers. It is the survey of black women’s novelistic tradition that reveals their agonizing tales along with their flights for liberation, acknowledging of their own culture and heritage. Black women have been involved in the development of African American writing since its inception. There are also major contributors to the history of black literature. The black burner status of female writers persists into the twentieth century too. Despite the legacy of this double standard, black women like black men, continued to write through the Depression years on into the 1960s.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Hence, it was the task of the Black women writers to mend their damaged portrayal created by white writers and black male writers. The black women have not been controlled and distorted by the capitalistic and racist society, but also by black men. Being doubly harassed, black women were unable to form clear perceptions about their existence. Images imposed by others do not allow the existence of the victim to come out, and being psychologically oppressed the victim does not define himself / herself with his / her own point of view but with the other’s point of view. A survey of black women novelist’s tradition would help us to understand about derogatory treatment they have received so far and how there is gradual awakening of

themselves and to protest against an iconographic landscape of Black once portrayed in mainstream of American literature.

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