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SOME IMPLICATIONS OF WOMANIST THEORY *

by Sherley Anne Williams

I am an Afro-Americanist and enough of an Africanist to know something of the enormous differences between African literatures and Afro-American literature, and something, too, of the remarkable parallels and similarities between them. We do in English, after all, trace our literary roots back to the same fore-parents, the Senegalese American, Phillis Wheatley and the Nigerian American Gustavas Vassa or Olaudah Equino, the African. So you must make your own analogies with what follows here; I am assuming that feminist criticism receives much the same reception it has met with among Afro-American critics, male and female. Often, feminist concerns are seen as a divisive, white importation that further fragments an already divided and embattled race, as trivial mind-games unworthy of response while black people everywhere confront massive economic and social problems. I don't deny feminism's potential for divisiveness, but the concerns of women are neither trivial nor petty. The relation between male and female is the very foundation of human society. If black men refuse to engage the unease at the race's heart, they cannot speak or even see truthfully anywhere else.

Feminist readings can lead to mis-apprehensions of particular texts or even of a whole tradition, but certain of its formulation offer us a vocabulary that can be made meaningful in terms of our own experience. Feminist theory, like black aesthetics, offers us not only the possibility of changing one's *reading* of the world, but of changing the world itself. And like black aesthetics, it is far more egalitarian than the prevailing mode. What follows, then, is both a critique of feminist theory and an application of that branch of it Alice Walker has called "womanist."¹ It is as much *bolekaja* criticism as "feminist" theory for black women writers had 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.²

Feminist criticism, to paraphrase Elaine Showalter's words in the "Introduction" to *The New Feminist Criticism*,³ challenges the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences. Some of the implications of this radical revisioning have already been realized in Afro-American literature. The works of forgotten black women writers are being resurrected and critics are at work revising the slighting, often misinformed, critical opinions of these works. We have a fuller understanding of these

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writers because feminist criticism has begun to eliminate much of the phallocentrism from our readings of their work and to recover the female aesthetics said to distinguish female creativity from male. We can see the results of this inquiry in the numerous monographs and articles that have appeared in the nine years since the publication of Barbara Smith's ground-breaking essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,"⁴ and in that some black male critics are now numbered among the ranks of feminist critics.

Much of the present interest in black feminist criticism is rooted in the fact that black women writers are among the most exciting writers on the contemporary American literary scene, but it began in the confrontation of black women readers in the early '70s with black female portraiture (or its lack) in fiction by black male writers. Debra McDowell, in "New Directions for Black Feminist Theory,"⁵ values these pioneering studies of negative and derogatory female portraiture as an impetus to early black feminist inquiry and acknowledges that a black feminist criticism must do more than "merely focus on how black men have treated black women in literature." McDowell's major concern is with encouraging the development of theories that will help us to see properly and understand the themes, motifs and idioms used by black women writers, but she raises other important issues as well. She touches upon one of the more disturbing aspects of current black feminist criticism: its separatism; its tendency to see not only a *distinct* black female culture but to see that culture as a separate cultural form having more in common with white female experience than it has with the facticity of Afro-American life. This proposition is problematic, even as a theoretical conjecture, especially since even its adherents have conceded that, until quite recently, black women's literary experiences were excluded from consideration in the literature of white feminists. For this reason, I prefer Alice Walker's term, *womanist*, as the referent for what I attempt here. Womanist theory is, by definition, "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people," female *and* male, as well as a valorization of women's works in all their varieties and multitudes. That commitment places it squarely within the challenge of engagement implicit in *bolekaja* criticism.

McDowell also calls for black feminist critics to turn their attention to the "challenging and necessary task" of a thoroughgoing examination of the works of black male writers, and suggests a line of inquiry that implicitly affirms kinship among Afro-American writers, "the countless thematic, stylistic, and imagistic parallels between black male and black female writing." Her call, however, does not go far enough. By limiting the studies of writings by black males to efforts "to determine the ways in which these commonalities are manifested differently in black women's writings and the ways in which they coincide with writings by black men," she seems to imply that feminist inquiry can only illuminate works by women and works that include female portraiture, that our re-readings of female images will not also change our readings of men. Womanist inquiry, on the other hand, assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men. This is a necessary assumption because the negative, stereotyped images of black women are only a part of the problem of phallogentric writings by black males. In order to understand that problem more fully, we must turn to what black men have written about themselves.

Much literature, classic and popular, by white American males valorizes the white patriarchal ideals of physical aggression, heroic conquest, and intellectual domination. Recognizing that a difference in actual circumstances forced distinguishing and different characteristics on would-be black patriarchs, a conventional feminist reading of literature by black males would see these ideals only partially "encoded" in their writings. Even so, such ideals would be the desired ones, and deviation from them taken as signs of diminished masculine self-esteem. That is, explicit social protest about racial prohibitions that restrict black men from exercising patriarchal authority is part of their "heroic quest" because they don't possess all the privileges of white men. Such a reading, of course, tends to reduce the black struggle for justice and equal opportunity to the right to beat one's wife and daughter. Many black men refused to exercise such "rights," and many black women resisted those who tried.⁶ Nor was physical aggression really a value in the literature of black males before 1940. Physical force, even when used by non-heroic black men, was almost always defensive, especially against white people, and, when used against other blacks, generally symbolized the corruption wrought by slavery. The initial *formulation*, however, does serve to illuminate some instances of black male self-portraiture, particularly in nineteenth century non-fiction prose narrative and fiction.

Nineteenth century black men, confronted with the impossibility of being the (white) patriarch, began to subvert certain of patriarchy's ideals and values to conform to their own images. Thus, the degree to which, and the basis on which, the hero avoids physical aggression was one means of establishing the hero's noble stature and contributed to the hero's intellectual equality – not dominance – with the collective white man. Frederick Douglass' 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*,⁷ offers several instances of this subversion and redefinition of white patriarchal ideals. I focus on what he will later call "The Fight."⁸ Douglass, an "uppity" slave, is hired out to Covey, a "nigger-breaker," to have his spirit curbed. Douglass' "fight" with Covey marks the turning point in his development from slave to free man. In the instant he refuses to be whipped, Douglass ceases "to be a slave in fact." Yet Douglass is not the aggressor. Douglass seizes Covey by the throat when the later tries to tie him up and holds him "uneasy"; though Douglass does draw Covey's blood, he actually touches him only with the ends of his fingers. Douglass brings the white man to the ground but never lays violent hands on him; rather, he "seizes him by the collar." Douglass is thus able to dominate Covey by his own self-restraint and self-control rather than *force major*. Douglass took a great delight in having bested Covey while conforming to a semblance of the master-slave relationship. In the later re-telling of the episode he returns "a polite, 'Yes, sir,'" to Covey's outraged, "'Are you going to continue to resist?'" and concludes, "I was 'victorious because my aim had not been to injure him but to prevent his injuring me.'" Robert B. Stepto, in *From Behind the Veil*⁹ (itself a brilliant example of the use to which genre studies can be put), details the brilliant strokes by which "Douglass reinforces his posture as an articulate hero" – i.e., the intellectual equal of the white men who introduce and thus vouch for the authenticity of Douglass and his narrative before the white world. Suffice it here to say that in "supplant[ing the white men] as

the definitive historian[s] of his past" Douglass self-consciously reverses the usual patterns of authentication in black texts and that this manifestation of his intellectual independence is characterized by the same restraint and subtlety as his description of his successful psychological rite of passage.

The pattern of self-restraint, of physical self control as an avenue to moral superiority and intellectual equality vis-à-vis white society, dominates male self-portraiture in the nineteenth century, where achieving heroic stature is most often the means by which the black male hero also assumes the mantel of the "patriarch." But the black patriarch in the nineteenth century has more to do with providing for and protecting his "dependents" than with wielding authority or exploiting their dependency so as to achieve his own privilege. Once free, Douglass marries, takes a job, becomes a leader in the struggle for the abolition of slavery; Josiah Henson, the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom,¹⁰ escapes from slavery with his wife beside him and two children on his back, works on the Underground Railroad, and founds a black township in Canada. Dr. Miller, the hero of Charles Chestnutt's turn-of-the-century novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*,¹¹ is a husband, father, son, and founder of a hospital and school for blacks. In other words, 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 black women, at least other black people.

The nature of the black male character's heroic quest and the means by which the hero achieves intellectual parity begin to change in the twentieth century. The heroic quest through the early thirties was a largely introspective one whose goal was the reintegration of the educated hero with the unlettered black masses who symbolized his negro-ness.¹² But the valuation of black community and black family (often an extended family) continues until 1940. Richard Wright's *Native Son* began a period in which the black heroic quest was increasingly externalized. A perceptive, though not necessarily articulate or educated, protagonist seeks recognition from the white power structure and in the process comes to recognize – and realize – himself. By the mid 1960s white society was typically characterized in the literature by physically frail and cowardly, morally weak, sexually impotent, effeminate white men and super-feminine white women who personified the official standard of feminine beauty – delicate, dainty, sexually inhibited until liberated by a hyper-potent black man.¹³ The goal of the black hero's quest was to dominate the one and marry the other. Black community, once the object of heroic quest, was, in these works, an impediment to its success; black female portraiture, when present, was often no more than demeaning stereotypes used to justify what even the hero sometimes recognized as a pathological obsession with the white woman. This kind of heroic quest is a dominant feature in some important contemporary texts; however, black male self-portraiture, by the late 1970s, was presented within a broader spectrum of themes – patriarchal responsibility, sibling relations, and male bonding – that were self-questioning rather than self-satisfied or self-righteous.¹⁴ These few texts can be construed as a positive response to the black feminist criticism of the early 1970s. Yet they are largely neglected by the Afro-American critical establishment which, by and large, leaves to the *New York Times* the task of canonizing our literature. The present interest in black women's writing arose outside that hegemony as had the interest in

black poetry in the late 1960s. And, like the black aesthetics that arose as a response to black arts poetry, black feminist criticism runs the risk of being narrowly proscriptive rather than broadly analytic.

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Using a combination of fiction and non-fiction prose by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver, Michele Wallace suggested, in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*,¹⁵ a black feminist reading of the development of modern black male self-image that is similar to what I have said here. Wallace was roundly damned and told by sister feminists “to read it again” as though we ourselves had not suspected, even suggested, these things before. And no one has quite dared since then to hold up the record black men have written of themselves. Rather, since black men gave little evidence of talking to us, we talked to each other.

Having confronted what black men have said about us, it is now time for black feminist critics to confront – and 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 male 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 traditional literary history and criticism.” Black women as readers and writers have been kept out of literary endeavor, so we had, and have, a lot to say. But to focus solely on ourselves is to fall into the same hole The Brother has dug for himself – narcissism, isolation, inarticulation, obscurity. Of course we must keep talking to and about ourselves but literature, as Chinweizu and Walker remind us, is about community and dialogue; theories or ways of reading ought actively to promote the enlargement of both.

Notes

1. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York, 1984).
2. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemi, and Ihechukwu Maduicuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington, D.C., 1983).
3. Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York, 1985).
4. Barbara Smith in Showalter, *op. cit.*
5. In Showalter, *op. cit.*, 186–99.
6. Further research in both traditional and contemporary Afro-American orature just might document that the community valued going “upside” anyone’s head as a *last*, rather than the first, resort at least as much as they admired the ability or will to do so.
7. Benjamin Quarles, ed. (Cambridge, 1960).
8. *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855; rep. New York, 1969).
9. Urbana, 1979.
10. *Father Henson's Own Story* (1849; rep. Upper Saddle River, N.J., 1970).
11. 1901; rep. Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1969.
12. The key texts include James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), and Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter* (1930).
13. The terminology is drawn from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (New York, 1968) but the portrayal

CALLALOO

can be found in the works of black male writers from Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison to Ishmael Reed.

14. Ernest J. Gaines's *In My Father's House* (1978), Wesley Brown's *Tragic Magic* (1978) come most readily to mind; however, the works of William Melvin Kelley, John McCluskey, and John A. Williams present a range of black male characters that still await close discussion.
15. New York, 1978.