



Intersectionality of Race and Gender in African American Women's Fiction

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Abstract: *This paper tries to understand the category of gender as represented in African American women's fiction with particular reference to Toni Morrison especially in view of the significantly changed construction of gender in the post 1980s feminist theory and praxis. The deconstruction of the binary notion of gender and the fluidity of the concept of gender itself is examined.*

Keywords: *Binary, non-binary, gender, categorisation, hierarchy, sex, history, sexuality, marginalisation.*

African American women's fiction serves as a rich tapestry, interweaving themes of race, gender, and identity into narratives that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives within the African American community. At its core, this genre explores the multifaceted nature of gender representation, delving into themes of intersectionality, agency, family dynamics, resistance, and historical context.

Intersectionality is a central theme in African American women's fiction, recognizing the complex interplay between race, gender, and other aspects of identity such as class, sexuality, and ability. Characters navigate the intersections of their identities, which shape their experiences and inform their struggles against various forms of oppression. These narratives challenge monolithic notions of identity, highlighting the diversity and complexity of African American women's experiences.

Agency and empowerment emerge as prominent motifs in African American women's fiction, as characters assert their autonomy and seek empowerment in personal, professional, and societal realms. These narratives often defy traditional gender norms and expectations, showcasing women who challenge the status quo and forge their paths despite societal constraints.

Family and community dynamics play a crucial role in African American women's fiction, offering insights into the complexities of relationships within these contexts. Themes of motherhood, sisterhood, and community support are common, illustrating the importance of kinship and solidarity in navigating life's challenges. These narratives illuminate the ways in which gender roles are constructed and negotiated within familial and communal settings.

Representation of Black masculinity is another key aspect of African American women's fiction, depicting a range of experiences from partnership and solidarity to conflict and tension. These representations contribute to broader discussions about gender dynamics within the African American community, highlighting the complexities of interpersonal relationships and societal expectations.

Resistance and resilience are recurring themes in African American women's fiction, as characters confront systems of oppression and navigate their personal journeys. These narratives celebrate the resilience and strength of African American women, emphasizing their capacity to resist and overcome adversity through collective action and self-empowerment. Historical context serves as a backdrop for many works of African American women's fiction, offering insights into the lived experiences of Black women throughout history. These narratives contextualize contemporary struggles within broader historical movements and events, shedding light on the enduring legacy of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Healing and self-discovery are central themes in African American women's fiction, as characters navigate their personal journeys and confront past traumas. These narratives emphasize the importance of self-care and self-empowerment for Black women, highlighting the transformative power of resilience, community, and self-love.

This paper seeks to provide an overview of how African American women's fiction provides a nuanced exploration of gender representation within the African American community, offering a diverse array of narratives that challenge stereotypes, celebrate resilience, and illuminate the complexities of identity and power. Through these narratives, African American women assert their voices, reclaim their stories, and contribute to broader conversations about representation, justice, and liberation.

Toni Morrison's fiction is located in a changed context of understanding in which the category of gender has transformed from being considered an inexorable law of nature to a matter of choice. As feminist thinkers have lucidly charted out, the traditional unexamined notion of gender had wrongly conflated the physiological category of sex with the cultural construct of gender. As though following the much-derided dictum of Sigmund Freud that 'anatomy is destiny' the patriarchal view of gender was that of a fixed category deriving from a physiological stratum. Both mythology and pseudo-science were generously employed to re-enforce such a notion of gender. Once again, as in the case of the 'self' and the 'other' in a colonial discourse, in the patriarchal discourse also, female was constructed as the 'other' of male. This binary opposition was held to be unchangeable. In its early phase feminism had to focus on the social, psychological and cultural consequences of such a dichotomous position. This was so because the designation as 'male' and 'female' was not the innocuous process of naming differences but of creating a hierarchy which was assumed to be legitimised by nature itself.

The focus of early feminist struggle was to revise the category of gender, to separate it from the physiological category of sex and to show how the hierarchisation of the two had led to the victimisation of women. Later feminist thinkers pointed out that behind this approach was a tacit acceptance of the dichotomy or of the notion that gender is a fixed category. It has also been pointed out many times that consciously or unconsciously the binary opposition was accepted as true and an attempt was made to internalise the male values in order to seek

equality with men. However, feminism has enriched itself through a continuous questioning of such a categorisation and of all rigid concepts of gender.

It would not be wrong to see the development of feminist theories as a move away from the rigid concept of gender to a more fluid one. Nor has this development been only a development within theory. This has happened because of substantial changes in the social institution of marriage, in notions of sexuality and also in the questioning of identity politics. The result is that increasingly gender is being viewed as a far more fluid category or at least as something that does not foreclose all alternative possibilities for human individuals. It is clear that Toni Morrison's fiction itself has resonated with these changing notions of gender and gender relationships.

In fact, as far as the African-American perspective is concerned, her fiction has contributed substantially to the changes referred to here. While Sethe in *Beloved*, belonging to a certain historical phase in the life of African-American community asserts her motherhood because the denial of motherhood was the most inhuman strategy of slavery, Sula in the eponymous novel, belonging to a much later period becomes a rebel by rejecting the traditional roles of wife and mother. Similarly, Jadine in *Tar Baby* who is Europeanised, and in a way emancipated, experiments with her own sexuality thereby rejecting many constraining notions of gender. More than anyone, it is Toni Morrison who has thrown open the space for black women to experiment with, to reject and to adopt various gender roles. It is in this sense that she can be said to perceive gender as a fluid category and as open to choice.

While on the one hand, the issue of race is problematical with nuanced perspectives, it is further complicated in Morrison's fiction with the interface with gender. Toni Morrison is the product of a later phase in African-American literature in which black feminism had foregrounded gender issues. Alternatively, the notions of race are further nuanced by making gender itself a point of reference. It is the process of the history of race being re-visioned by a gender-centred experience.

In the early development of black feminism, the interface between race and gender began with the interrogation by black feminists of the universalist claims of European feminism. They raised questions regarding the legitimacy of European women claiming to represent all the problems of women as a general category irrespective of race and nationality. They also raised doubts about the utopian notion of the sisterhood of women.¹ While they actively participated in the women's struggles the world over, they also felt a strong need to assert their difference on the basis of race. This led to the influential notion of the double bondage of the black woman, doubly exploited by race and gender. It is also possible to see this as a product of black women's response to the manner in which the emancipatory struggle of black men was itself marginalising black women. Later black women writers pointed out how the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and the Civil Rights Struggle claimed to represent the entire black community without showing sensitivity to locations in terms of class and gender. From a reading of the early writings of black women it is also possible to see that they were trying to articulate their suffering under

¹A detailed discussion on this can be found in bell hooks' work *Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory*, Boston: South End Press, 1984, 1-15.

the patriarchy of black men. In recent years, feminist thinkers have increasingly opposed what they termed as 'gender realism' of earlier feminists. For instance, Elizabeth Spelman has influentially argued that gender realists assume that gender is constructed independently of race, class or nationality. She pointed out that the white middle class feminists passed off their notions of gender as the ultimate truth and failed to take into account the differing notions of gender. They also failed to recognise that there was no essential womanhood common to all and the construction of the notion of gender is mediated by other categories which are just as powerful as patriarchy. In her influential work *The Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988) Spelman notes that in failing to see the importance of race and class in gender construction, white middle-class Western feminists conflated "the condition of one group of women with the condition of all."

In retrospect, we can now see how feminist theory benefitted immensely from the intervention of black feminism. It was able to free itself from universalist notions of gender and was able to recognise the significance of difference. Ann Ducille notes that black feminist literary studies had not only to

...correct the omissions and distortions of male-dominated literary and critical traditions, it also had to contend with the myopia of white feminist scholars who, like their nineteenth century precursors, took "woman" to mean "white woman"... Black women artists, activists and intellectuals... were, on the one hand, marginalised within a male-centered African-American literary tradition because of their allegedly "feminist" preoccupation with women's issues; and on the other hand, they were excluded from the developing mainstream feminist literary canon because of their assumed preoccupation with the politics of race (39).

If this is the central issue of early black feminism, writers like Toni Morrison explore the interface of race and gender in a later historical phase during which American society had attempted assimilation of the blacks through democratic and civic rights reforms. Another important aspect was the newly discovered feminine sexuality which plays a central role in Toni Morrison's fiction. This is also an example of how a feminist inspired understanding of women's sexuality was foregrounded as a challenge to patriarchy. The present work intends to see the exploration of race and gender in the context of their problematisation owing to these developments within black feminism and also in the African-American community itself under the sway of modernity and struggles for equality including that of gender.

If we bring together the revised notion of race and an equally radically revised notion of gender (as briefly pointed out in the preceding paragraphs) it can be argued that Toni Morrison's fiction has to be understood with frameworks which are sensitive to this new understanding of the two categories. What is far more interesting is to see what happens in Toni Morrison's fiction when she allows race and gender to interact in a complex way. What Toni Morrison is proposing, through her fiction, is nothing short of a new black feminist historiography itself. This historiography first of all eschews all forms of entrapment of official, mainstream historiography. It also gives the slip to the domination of events and facts. Again, it avoids the sentimental appeal to the addressee (who used to the white reader). It also rejects the so-called archival materials of history-writing. Instead, it directly enters into the lived lives of the black people themselves of which their memories are the reliable expression.