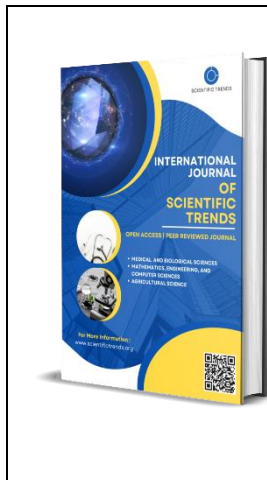


Analysis of Motherhood in African American Literature: Exploring Sociocultural and Gender Representations

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Abstract

The article reveals sociocultural and gender perspectives, with a focus on black feminist theories, to dive into the complexities of black motherhood in African American literature. Each theory offers unique insights into the portrayal of black women and mothers in literary works, while also applying black feminist principles to highlight the specific experiences of black mothers.

Keywords: Feminists, Black Mothers, Domesticated Motherhood, Liberal Motherhood, Racism.

Introduction

The way black mothers are viewed in American society has been influenced by their portrayal in historical context. An analysis of African American literature shows how motherhood is a social construct that is shaped by evolving socio-cultural dynamics. The study also explores the shifting ideologies surrounding black motherhood, from traditional domestic roles to more empowered and liberated identities, as observed throughout literary and historical eras. It aims to demonstrate how black motherhood has transformed from a marginalized and silenced role to one that serves as a source of inspiration for empowerment and resistance against structural racism and sexism for black women. Motherhood is depicted as a significant transformation, encompassing physical, mental, and emotional changes for women. Adrienne Rich explains that motherhood is acquired through the processes of pregnancy, childbirth, and raising children. In her book "Of Woman Born," she emphasizes that motherhood is earned through an intense physical and emotional journey, followed by the learning process of nurturing, which is not innate. Rich underscores the weight of responsibility that women carry, stating that motherhood is a substantial societal burden due to the profound personal transformations it entails.

Materials and Methods

This research explores the concept of motherhood and its portrayal in African American literary works from the mid-1800s to the late 20th century, covering the period from 1850 to the 1980s. It takes a genealogical approach, tracking the changing ideas of human behavior over time by examining and examining writings by African American authors from the era of slavery to the postmodern period. The chosen texts for this study, such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "The Slave Mother" (1854), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Lonesome" (1896), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Claude McKay's "My Mother" (1920), Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother" (1945), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), Nikki Giovanni's "Mothers" (1968), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Maya Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" (1978), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), are from different periods of historical and literary development, where the theme of motherhood is a recurring motif and lifelong commitment. The literary works reflect the various roles of black mothers, addressing them through terms such as Mama, Mammy, Ma, and Big Mama, which reveal aspects of black identity and submission. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, explains that the term "mammy" in the US carries a symbolic meaning - specifically, it denotes a black woman working as a faithful and obedient servant in a white household. This term has a derogatory connotation, rooted in the history of American slavery. Ann DuCille describes these terms as "the quintessential site of difference," highlighting how they set African American women apart in social, cultural, and racial contexts.

Results

African American authors depict the experiences of black women in their writing, particularly the experiences of black mothers and the challenges they face in finding self-worth and overcoming disillusionment. These authors offer various perspectives on black motherhood, examining and shaping their identities. This study centers on the portrayal of black maternal figures in literature and how the concept of motherhood has evolved. It also explores the impact of race and gender on the oppression of black women and mothers. African American literature reflects the experiences of black individuals, focusing particularly on the challenges faced by black women as mothers. This research aims to understand how black writers have portrayed these maternal figures and how their identities have been shaped by race and gender. It questions whether the struggles of black women are solely due to their gender or if factors such as race and culture also contribute to their oppression. The study recognizes that previous research has primarily considered the feminist perspective and seeks to delve deeper into the dual oppression faced by black women and mothers.

Discussion

African American literature mirrors the social and cultural aspects of black people's lives, highlighting the struggles and suffering faced by black women in particular, as they navigate the restrictive expectations of womanhood and motherhood. The challenge lies in understanding whether these difficulties stem solely from gender, or if race and culture also contribute to their oppression. Previous research focusing solely on feminist perspectives does not fully capture the dehumanization and dual oppression experienced by black women and mothers. Works like

Harper's "The Slave Mother," Jacobs' Incidents, Dunbar's "Lonesome," and Johnson's *The Autobiography* also unveil the difficulties faced by black individuals in American society, striving for equality while contending with racist and sexist social structures that limit their opportunities. Black women and mothers are grappling with confinement within slavery or societal pressures, resulting from their roles and responsibilities being shaped by prevailing social and cultural norms. This study is important because it sheds light on the unique experiences and diversity within the group of black mothers. It highlights the marginalized and outsider status of black women, presenting them as a group whose experiences are representative of all women. According to Patricia Bell-Scott, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Jacqueline Jones Royster in their work "The Promise and Challenge of Black Women's Studies" delving into the experiences of black women reveals "a broad and complex study of individuals who face the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender oppression—among the most extensive inquiries into human experience."

Rich's groundbreaking work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), is a detailed exploration of motherhood. She uses her personal experiences, historical research, and literature to advocate for changes in the way society views women and mothers. Stressing the essential role of mothers as life givers, she emphasizes, "All human life on the planet originates from women."

Additionally, Rich discusses the dual meanings of motherhood: the personal experience and the institutional framework that attempts to control women and their reproductive power. This institutionalization of motherhood has been a fundamental aspect of various social and political systems throughout history.

Rich explains:

... two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction, and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems.

Rich explains that motherhood has both personal and societal dimensions, with the latter being a system that seeks to control women and their reproductive abilities. This system has been a crucial aspect of various social and political systems throughout history.

Ruddick argues that the societal expectations of women as mothers involve nurturing the lives and development of their children, and this is seen as their primary role. She emphasizes the importance of mothers meeting the needs of their children with love and attention. Ruddick also discusses the differentiation between the biological act of childbirth and the ongoing nurturing and care that mothers provide. She explains that mothering involves ongoing care and responsibility, whereas childbirth is a separate activity. This implies that a mother is the primary caregiver and nurturer of a child. Ruddick concentrates on the essential tasks of mothering, which involve protecting, nurturing, and training children. Concerning the duties of a mother, she notes that being a "mother" entails taking on the responsibility of childcare, and this becomes a significant and regular part of one's life. Mothers are defined by their commitment to fulfilling the demands of motherhood. This concept is valuable for understanding and examining maternal responsibilities, as it highlights the primary duty of preserving, nurturing, and training children, and acknowledges the societal expectations placed on women to fulfill these responsibilities.

Hooks' book "Ain't I a Woman" (1981) is named after Sojourner Truth's powerful anti-slavery address, "Ain't I a Woman?", which she delivered in Ohio in 1851. In her speech, Truth urges black women to stand up for their rights. Recognizing Truth's pivotal role in the fight for equality for black women, hooks asserts that "Sojourner Truth wasn't the only black woman advocating for women's social equality. Her willingness to publicly speak out in support of women's rights in the face of public disapproval and resistance paved the way for other politically active black women to voice their opinions."

Spillers' work "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) is a significant contribution to African-American literature as it presents a theory that analyzes the gender construction of African-American women. She focuses on the supposed issue of matriarchal family structures within the black community, arguing that this structure deviates from the societal norms of American culture. Spillers highlights the contrasting family structures within the black community compared to the broader American society. She refutes the conclusions of the Moynihan Report 1965, which emphasizes the long-standing roots of black poverty resulting not from a lack of employment opportunities, but from the breakdown of the black family structure. She argues that in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's well-known "Report" of the late sixties, the "Negro Family" is without a father figure- his authority, his rules, and his symbolic role are conspicuously absent from the essential fabric of the black community. She highlights that the report centers on the absence of paternal figures in the Negro family, a significant omission in the black community. Collins' Black Feminist Thought (1990) delves into the lives, experiences, and ideas of black women that deserve thorough scrutiny. Drawing from the perspectives of African American women, Collins argues for the necessity of equality and justice for black women. She examines the topics of oppression, family, work, and activism, shedding light on the cultural and sexual politics that confine black women. By doing so, Collins challenges the dominance of white feminists in feminist theory. She emphasizes that black women cannot fully align with either feminist thought, which primarily focuses on white women, or black social thought, which prioritizes males. Despite facing racial and gender discrimination, Collins showcases the rich intellectual tradition that African American women have managed to develop.

Dolan Hubbard, in the Introduction of The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, discusses the tension between blacks and whites, noting that Hughes depicts the lives of working-class people who are largely excluded from the American Dream due to their skin color. This analysis highlights racial inequality and shows that Hughes' works portray the struggles of poor black people who are marginalized in society. The community of Stanton is visibly divided, with African-Americans living in wooden shacks while prosperous whites like Mrs. Rice reside in luxurious buildings. This racial inequality creates social difficulties and divides the population.

The lack of a dependable father figure in Sandy's life is compensated by maternal figures. Sandy grows up without a stable father figure but receives consistent support from his grandmother, and later from his mother and aunts. Describing the void left by the absence of a strong father figure in Sandy's life, Daniela Fargione, in "From Langston Hughes' Not Without Laughter to Langston Hughes' Piccola America Negra: Where's the Music Gone?", explains:

`... the absence of a strong paternal figure in Sandy's life is widely counterbalanced by the hefty presence of the three women he lives with: Aunt Hager, his maternal grandmother and a loving churchwoman; Anjee, his devoted mother and hard worker; and Harriett, Sandy's favorite aunt

and model, the independent and rebellious folk soul, who eventually becomes the 'Princess of the Blues`.

Fargione presents the idea that Sandy's lack of a strong father figure is balanced out by the presence and support of Aunt Hager, Annjee, and Harriett. These strong female figures play the role of both mother and father for Sandy, ensuring that he never feels the absence of a father in his life. Fargione's work illustrates the reality of African American society, where mothers often have to take on sole responsibility for their families due to the absence of a strong male figure. This portrayal sheds light on an important aspect of black family dynamics that is unique to black communities.

Conclusion

This research indicates that the lives of black women, particularly black mothers, are influenced by socio-cultural, racial, and gender factors, impacting their attitude, behavior, self-esteem, and self-concept. Historical periods like Slavery and Post-slavery subjected African-Americans to discrimination and segregation, leading to the assumption that low self-esteem resulted from their minority status. This study reveals that motherhood serves both as a source of oppression and empowerment for black women, motivating them to resist racism and sexism. Without maternal responsibilities, their courage in confronting structural challenges would be diminished. The research highlights the fatherly role assumed by black mothers, shouldering the family's sole responsibility in impoverished communities. Despite facing poverty and oppression, these women display resilience in overcoming obstacles for the better future of their children. Thus, the literary depiction of motherhood reflects the distinctive history and experiences of African American women.

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