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Anxiety of Authorship and African American Women Poets

Hima Parayil Kalesan

Research Scholar,
Eotvos Lorand University,
Budapest, Hungary.

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Abstract:

African American women writers have been very affirmative about their identity. The rich tradition of African American women poets who embraced and celebrated their identity can be seen as an anomaly to the anxiety of authorship Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar talks about in their seminal work “The Madwoman in an Attic”. Writing is an active form of protest for these women. African American women writers claim their descent from their literary foremothers such as Philips Wheatley, Francis Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Zora Neale Hurston. Their literature could be viewed as their space for a positive affirmation and celebration of their selfhood.

Keywords: African American Poets, Anxiety of Authorship, Anxiety of Influence.

Words possess unfathomable power and possessing such power would mean liberation or freedom. Freedom of expression unfetters humans from their self-devouring silence. The power of word can trigger revolutions and hence change is an inevitable by-product of it. Words’ power is such that ‘naming’ a thing gives us a certain kind of authority over it. The biblical story of genesis tells us of Adam who named everything and hence gained power over all of it and made himself superior to Eve. There is also a story about Lilith, Adam’s less known wife. Legends hold that Lilith, who was created out of clay rather than from Adam’s rib like Eve, would not relinquish the power of word and subordinate her to Adam. Lilith was banished from heaven and cursed to devour her own children for her resistance (Leonard 191). This story has often been quoted by feminists like Gilbert and Gubar while speaking of difficulties women writers face. They address the poignant question of what it is to be a woman writer in an overtly and fundamentally patriarchal culture. They pose the question whether women writers are allowed to

use their own vocabulary or are they supposed to conform to the patriarchal vocabulary (Gilbert and Gubar 50).

Gilbert and Gubar's theory of anxiety of authorship concerning female writers is completely agreeable in a fundamentally patriarchal culture. It was a response to Bloom's anxiety of influence. They were also trying to break the patriarchal frameworks and images in which women were confined hitherto. The notion of women being either good and angelic or evil and monstrous is examined by Gilbert and Gubar in "Madwoman in an Attic". They question the basis of intellectual incapacity the patriarchal culture has imposed on women. A thinking woman was considered as abnormal by our overtly patriarchal culture. Women who were the first to attempt writing were evidently infected by the feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and inferiority that their education in femininity by their male precursors has induced. Many seventeenth and eighteenth century women writers usually indicated that they felt in some sense apologetic about such a presumptuous pastime. As Virginia Woolf observed, the woman writer seemed locked into a disconcerting double bind; she has to choose between admitting she was 'only a woman' or protesting that she was 'as good as a man' (Woolf 12). They further discuss the anxiety of influence postulated by Harold Bloom. Anxiety of influence basically refers to an author's fear that his work is not entirely his own creation and the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings. Bloom's paradigm of sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father and son. This interpretation of Harold Bloom has its roots in the Freudian concept of oedipal complex (Gilbert and Gubar 53).

Gilbert and Gubar points out why critics think Bloom's model to be intensely male and overtly patriarchal. Bloom has taken in to account only the male writers when he discussed the crucial warfare a poet engages in with his predecessor. Bloom's model is considered extremely sexist as it describes the whole literary history as a crucial warfare of father and sons. Bloom sees Milton's fiercely masculine fallen Satan as the poet in our culture and defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and a female muse. The main objection to this idea of Bloom is that it does not accommodate women writers in its conceptualization. A woman writer does not fit anywhere in the model explained by Bloom. Even so, Gilbert and Gubar thought it was right of bloom to bring fore to the centre something that was taken as natural and

thus ignored hitherto. They consider Bloom's historical construct to be useful as it helps define the patriarchal psychosexual context in which the western literature was authored and also helps us distinguish the anxieties and achievements of female writers from those of male writers (Gilbert and Gubar 60).

The possibility of female writers not experiencing the anxiety of influence in the same way as her male counterparts is discussed by Sandra and Gubar as these female writers confront only male precursors who are significantly different from her. These male precursors incarnate patriarchal authority and attempt to conform her in definitions and stereotypes. These definitions and stereotypes that her male precursors impose upon her create a conflict with her perception of self, subjectivity, autonomy and her creativity. Male precursors symbolize authority over women writers as well as fail to define her in the way she experiences herself. Gilbert and Gubar brings forth the concept of the anxiety of authorship which is a radical fear a woman writer has that she cannot be a writer, and that she cannot become a precursor and the act of writing will isolate or destroy her. The female writer's struggle is not against the male precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of her (Gilbert and Gubar 68).

The woman writer is in search for a female model because she wants to legitimize her own rebellious endeavors. At the same time the woman writer experience gender as a painful obstacle like most women conditioned by patriarchy. She is victimized by the inferiorized and alternative psychology of women under patriarchy. This inferiorization mark the woman's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart. Gilbert and Gubar compare the anxiety of influence experienced by male writers and the anxiety of authorship which the female writers experience. When compared to the strong- father son combat the female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. The woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her (Gilbert and Gubar 68).

Women writers who looked up to their precursors could find writers like Finch and Bradstreet who apologized for their supposed inadequacies and also writers like Aphra Behn and Cavendish who flaunted their freakishness. Among the nineteenth century descendants of this tradition of women writers were those who attempted to solve the literary problem of being female by presenting themselves as male. George Sand and George Eliot were writers who used

male impersonations to gain acceptance of their intellectual seriousness. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly said that women “still dream through the dreams of men.” The woman who has to impersonate a man to be accepted is still under the clutches of patriarchal dominance. Margaret Fuller rightly summarizes the problems faced by women writers in her journal thus, “I love best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too straightly-bound to give me scope. At hours, I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle; as, on the other hand, I should palsy, when I play the artist” (Gilbert and Gubar 71).

We have so far considered how it is to be a female writer in an overtly patriarchal world. Now let us see how it would be to be a black woman writer in this same world. As reckoned by the dominant ideology, black women by being black and being woman belong to two congenitally inferior groups. Struggles for gender equality unite all feminists but, in contrast to other feminists, black feminists had to fight against both sexism and racism. The white male academics like Shockley and Jensen’s attempts to prove scientifically black women’s racial and sexual inferiority illustrate the disadvantaged position black women held in society. Their overt question is that “How could a being who combines two mentally deficient biological identities do anything with her intellect, her non-existent powers of mind?”(Wallace 7). The most pejorative concept in the white male world view would be that of thinking and acting like a black woman.

The interesting factor here is that unlike the women writers that Gilbert and Gubar talks of, African American Women writers have been very affirmative and positive about their identity. We don’t find many of them resorting to pseudonyms like the other women writers. For them, writing was a fight for establishing their identity and space. From very early days of their literary venture, we witness African American women writers embracing their identity. The way they view their identity and relate to their femininity has undergone major changes over centuries but the fact they have always been proud of it despite having faced grave oppressions remains intact.

The unrecorded history of African American literature would take us back to the times when African women resorted to their songs and stories to soothe fears and silence moans of despair during their terrible voyage from Africa to North American colonies. All literary traditions’ origin can essentially be traced back to mothers creating lullabies and lovers

composing poems. Alike every other women in the world, African American women too recited their personal histories and created prayers to strengthen their hope, faith and courage. They kept their tradition alive by passing on these poems, songs and stories to their succeeding generations. In this process of passing on from generation to generation these stories and poems acquired changes over centuries.

Black women's poetry is very often an expression of the multi-layered texture of their lives. There has been an enormous production of black women's writing after the civil rights movement which is generally recognized as the African American women's literary movement. It is, by and large, an extension of the black arts movement. The roots of African American literary history can be traced back to 1746 when Lucy Terry composed the first known poem by an African American. African American women writers have chronicled and critiqued the American experience since then. Lucy Terry Prince was brought to Rhode Island as a slave from Africa. She composed a ballad "Bars Fight" which describes an Indian raid on Massachusetts settlers in 1746. It was orally preserved until it was published in 1855. African American women writers have become an integral part of American literature and culture since long. Phillis Wheatley was the first published African American poet and one of the very early American women to get her poems published. African American women writers claim their descent from their literary foremothers such as Philips Wheatley, Francis Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Zora Neale Hurston. Harper's poem "A Double Standard" clearly announces her view that women should be treated as equal to men.

"Crime has no sex and yet to-day
I wear the brand of shame;
Whilst he amid the gay and proud
Still bears an honoured name."

During the 1960s and 1970s African American Women writers were highly influential and popular as they were connected to the liberation movements. By then, African American Women's poetry exhibited an evident acceptance of selfhood. The feminist thought that Harper had seeded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sprouted into a healthy sapling in the later years of the twentieth century. One could clearly see matters such as

sexuality, subversion of dominant ideologies on motherhood and womanhood as themes explored by the African American women writers of the Harlem Renaissance period.

In the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century African American women poetry we witness a trend of identification with the larger concept of womanhood while simultaneously affirming their unique identity. Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" explores a theme that affirms this argument. The poem begins with a sharp comment "Pretty Woman wonder where my secret lies/I'm not cute or built to fit a fashion model's size"(Angelou) ,saying that she is neither cute nor has a great figure to suit a model's size. She tells that 'pretty women' often wonder about the secret of her success. She says that when she reveals her so-called secrets to them, they decline to trust her. She discloses her secret saying that it comes from her confidence, the way she stretches her arms, the way she walks, the rhythm of her hips and also the way she smiles. Her entire body is a manifestation of grace and womanliness. The poet closes the first stanza by claiming that she is a 'phenomenal woman'. Here the word 'phenomenal' can have dual meanings, one that is she is huge and the second, she has a soaring personality. Thus she is huge in both physique and personality. The attitude of the poem is that of a strong, confident woman who does not bother what people think about her. She finds happiness in her womanhood. In the first three stanzas, she describes what other people think about and her reaction towards their viewpoint. She is not ashamed about her huge body. She considers herself a supreme woman and rejoices womanhood. "Phenomenal Woman" presents a subversion of the body image flaunted by the dominant ideology.

A tornado of black women writers occurred in the late 20th and 21st century in America which includes various well-known names such as Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, Audre Lorde , Rita Dove and the like. Black women writers of this generation were driven in to a quest for identity. They address the question of how they should be assertive about their identity in a world that prefers to believe that we do not exist. A brand new generation of women writers is on the scene, all of whom are within and extending tradition.21st century poets such as Marelyn Nelson and Rita Dove have employed universal forms to articulate universal ideals within the context of African American culture (Leonard 12,13).

Audre Lorde had rightly said that “Poetry is not a luxury” for African American women since the act of speaking, naming one’s own reality has been an act of self-assertion as important as protests in determining how they live in the American society. Writing is an active form of protest for these women. It served as a medium for the assertion of their identity in a male dominated world where they couldn’t afford to talk about their life and its micro and macro trauma they have to endure.

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