Female Subjectivity in African-American Women's Poetry

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A Critical Reading

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Dedicated to my dearest ‘Baba’ and my family

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

> When I think of how essentially alone black women have been—alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control… and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realise that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life…. Because of these writers, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us. (Washington qtd. in Mitchell and Taylor 1)

For African-American women poets, writing is an outlet to effuse the anger and the agonies against the indifference of White people towards Black, especially Black women. Buchi Emecheta shares her experience of pleading with her husband not to burn the books as they are just like her children. Correlating the books with her babies, she accepts them with all their oddities, even when the other person objectively criticises them. John Stuart Mill argues that "writing about female creativity" (Showalter 3) and their struggle brings independence to their works without any influence of the "male literary tradition" (Showalter 3). Further, he states that if women had "lived in a different country from men" (Mill qtd. in Showalter 3), they would have created "literature of their own" (Mill qtd. in Showalter 3). Mary Washington states that Black women writers are "alone", having no one to write for them but themselves. Nevertheless, in the American scenario, racism adds to the patriarchal hegemony, and the society, once deeply rooted in a system of slavery, made things worse for Black women.

African-American women writers have "used the Word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become" (Mitchell and Taylor 1). Many scholars, such as Barbara Smith, Hazel Carby, and others, have stated that Black women are judged based on their merit and the "cult of true womanhood" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 79). Sojourner Truth is a prime example of someone who challenged the racist society of her time with her work, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. This book depicts the narratives of enslaved people as well

as the spiritual narratives of women. Black women writers have contributed to the literary tradition since the eighteenth century, but literary connoisseurs neglected their writings until the 1960s. Thereby, the 1960s brought more prominence to African-American women's literature which came into view basically because of the policies and reforms that gave rise to women's studies programmes in the academic institutes of the United States. This change has been viable:

> With the dismantling of legal segregation and the political and social enfranchisement of African Americans as a result of the civil rights movement, historically white colleges and universities in the United States began diversifying not only their student bodies, but also their curricula. (Mitchell and Taylor 2)

The term "Black women's studies" (Hull, Scott and Smith xvii) serves as an enactment filled with political appreciation. The combination of the words to "name a discipline means taking the stance that Black women exist— and exist positively— a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North American continent. To use the term and to act on it in a white-male world is an act of political courage" (Hull, Scott and Smith xvii). The African-American poet, activist, and essayist Audre Lorde talks about the "dark place within" (Lorde 36) every woman, which is "ancient and hidden" (Lorde 36) and how Black women writers have "survived and grown strong through that darkness" (Lorde 36). Additionally, she says that a woman's "place of power" (Lorde 37) within is "dark", "deep" rather than "white." For African-American women poets, "poetry is not a luxury" (Lorde 37) but is a medium of conscientisation. Talking about poetry, Audre Lorde claims:

> It [poetry] is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (Lorde 37)

Audre Lorde asserts that poetry for Black women poets is essential for voicing the marginal voices of Blacks. Poetry for Black women poets is a medium to liberate themselves from stereotypes and historical misrepresentations. All these poets try to efface these stereotypical connotations associated with Black women with a language of their own, thus, not confining themselves to one genre, instead trying to universalise their voice. Regarding this, the Pulitzer Prize winner Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* states, "there's no reason to subscribe authors to

particular genres…. I'm a writer, and I write in the form that most suits what I want to say" (Dove qtd. in Ingersoll 14).

Emergence and Growth of the African-American Women's Poetry

One has to begin with the creation of mankind to apprehend African-American women's poetry— "its historical evolution, its aesthetic beauty, its political power" (Mitchell and Taylor 168). Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar cite the tale of Lilith[1] and Eve as how the former is being replaced by the latter. Eve gains stature at the expense of Lilith and draws an analogy of how women in Britain faced problems articulating in the patriarchal society. Females are marginalised, but it coheres to many more problems in the United States as racism fastens with the patriarchy. Spivak examines *Jane Eyre* and its "inscription" in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, portraying the imperialist attitude towards the "Third World" women. Validating her point in the essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", in which Jane Eyre celebrates her freedom and status by subduing Bertha's identity (Creole heiress).

On the contrary, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette Cosway (pseudo name of Bertha) celebrates hers' at the cost of Christophine. A Black person is considered a "non-person." Moreover, a Black woman is banished like Lilith and Bertha and experiences only invisibleness from society, throwing her out into the "self-devouring silence" (Mitchell and Taylor 168). Similarly, the African woman, Saartjie Baartman, popularly known as the Venus Hottentot, was treated as a commodity. She was deployed to entertain the public of Britain, France, and other European countries.

From the beginning, enslaved Black people started penning poetry. Lucius C. Matlock argues that by the mid of 19th century, slavery becomes the "most prolific theme of much that is profound in argument, sublime in poetry, and thrilling in narrative" (Bibb i). But poetry was never thought to be the domain of African-American women as stereotypical notions are associated with them. Thus, Black women are assumed to be uncivilised and savage creatures. Black women were treated as non-humans; on the one

[1] Lilith, Adam's first wife, refused to accept the fact that Adam was rendered the power to name because he was a male. According to the legend, Lilith was made from clay as was Adam, and not from Adam's rib like Eve. So, Lilith was not ready to be an understrapper of Adam. For this, she was shunned from the Garden of Eden and cursed to destroy her own children.

hand, they were excluded from the feminist struggle, and on the other, they were dominated by their Black men and community.

Nevertheless, the resilience of African-American women poets was surprisingly remarkable. Only a handful of Black women poets paved their way and produced their writing in poetry anthologies representing the accurate picture of America. A few women poets emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries compared to the Black male poets. Black women poets such as Ann Plato, Frances E. W. Harper, Adah Isaacs Menken, Toi Derricotte, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Mary Weston Fordham, Opal Moore, H. Cordelia Ray, Octavia V. Rogers Albert, Gertrude Bustill Mossell, Annie L. Burton, Amelia E. Johnson, Josephine D. Heard, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, Clara Ann Thompson, Priscilla Jane Thompson, Eloise Bibb, Effie Waller Smith, and Anne Spencer represent the 19th and 20th century. It can be said that the land of slavery evolved as an embellished land creating new poetry by Black women expressing the oppression and striving to overthrow the discriminatory system.

Later, Harlem Renaissance empowered the Blacks' art, literature, and poetry and celebrated Black culture, but it rarely did elevate the conditions of Black women. Black women poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neal Hurston, Nella Larsen, Angelina Weld Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Ethel Caution-Davis, Carrie Williams Clifford, Anita Scott Coleman, Marion Grace Conover, Mae. V. Cowdery, Clarissa Scott Delany, Blanche Taylor Dickinson, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Sarah Lee Brown Fleming, Edythe Mae Gordon, Naomi Long Madgett, Mari Evans, Pinkie Gordon Lane, Marita Bonner, Eulalie Spence, Dorothy West, Angelina Weld Grimke, Gladys May Casely Hayford, Virginia Houston, Dorothy Vena Johnson, Helen Aurelia Johnson, Helene Johnson, Alice E. Furlong, Gertrude Parthenia McBrown, Myra Estelle Morris, Beatrice M. Murphy, Pauli Murray, Effie Lee Newsome, Lucia Mae Pitts, Esther Popel, Grace Vera Postles, Ida Rowland, Anne Spencer, Clara Ann Thompson, Lucy Mae Turner, Lucy Ariel Williams, Octavia B. Wynbush and others despite facing sexism and racism worked in integrity to eliminate these inequities. It is the power of these women poets that they could challenge the biased society and voice for their emancipation. It is aptly said that "living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing black feminist thought" (Sheftall, *Words* 349) and Black women adhere to their own experiences bringing in an "Afrocentric feminist epistemology" (Sheftall, *Words* 349). June Jordan, the renowned poet, articulates her life which "seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate trace of universal struggle" (Jordan qtd.

in Collins, "Black Feminist Thought"). One of the noted Black women poets, Nikki Giovanni, says: "I date all my work" (Giovanni qtd. in Collins, "Black Feminist Thought") as she thinks that "poetry, or any writing, is but a reflection of the movement. The universal comes from the particular" (Giovanni qtd. in Collins, "Black Feminist Thought").

African-American poetry, theatre groups, music, and dance performances became popularised during the BAM (Black Arts Movement) in the 1950s, thus making BAM one of the significant events in African-American history. The movement encouraged poetry as the standard form of teaching, which had a mass appeal more than stories and novels. Poems on themes of political slogans and chants were written during the Black Arts Movement, instigating the spirit of freedom in the minds of Black people. Building the feminist framework, African-American women poets tried to unearth the racialised gendered inequality which prevailed in society through their works, thus, creating their own space.

Space and Reclamation of African-American Identity

> 'Other' is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences that space where our words would be if we were speaking if there were silence if we were there. This 'we' is that 'us' in the margins, that 'we' inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space. Often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice.... Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk". (hooks, *Yearning* 152)

Defying the concept of "Other" and labelling it as the "mask", bell hooks contemplates the space where the hegemonic class provides limited access to the power of knowledge for Black women. Instead, the Whites are the "authors" holding the "authority" and penning about the state of Black women who would solely elevate the stature of Whites. African-American women are believed incapable of voicing their own experiences in their writings. Black feminists severely criticise this kind of Whites stereotypical attitude. Subsequently, they focus on the fact that Black women must be rendered with their own voice. Eventually, many Black women poets have strived to earn recognition in the most inhospitable conditions for Black women. Expounding on the spaces, bell hooks propagates that "Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (hooks, *Yearning* 152). It is from this space that Black

women strive to write and "move in solidarity" (hooks, *Yearning* 152) to efface the hegemonic relations between Whites and Blacks using their "marginality as [a] site of resistance" (hooks, *Yearning* 152).

Further, African-American women can be rightly called, in the words of Maya Angelou, the "caged bird", and their survival truly delineate their endurance which closely brings in the ideology of Darwinism. Defining oppression as the "multiple jeopardy", Deborah K. King stresses the fact that Black women should constitute a "political ideology capable of interpreting and resisting that multiple jeopardy" (King 69). The revolt imprinted on Black women's struggle in mainstream society. The absence of proper space that Black women would have and call their own represents the "politics of location" (Davies 113) which showcases "…whole host of identifications and associations around concepts of place, placement, displacement….It is about positionality in society based on class, gender, sexuality….in which one is able to access, mediate…or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances" (Davies 113).

Since the slavery period, Black women were thought to be the landlord's bondslaves and also confined to the three-dimensional zones: "the family", "patriarchy", and "reproduction." The subjectivity of Black women is "a migratory...existing in multiple locations" (Davies 3), so it can be observed as "how their work, their presences traverse all of the geographical/national boundaries instituted to keep our dislocations in place" (Davies 3). The "ability to locate in a variety of geographical and literary constituencies is peculiar to the migration" (Davies 3), and it is "fundamental to African experience as it is specific to the human as a whole" (Davies 3). Subjectivity and establishing identity are interrelated to "place and displacement" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 391), corresponding to the history and language one faces while studying colonised people's lives.

The identity of Black women has always been in a "contested terrain" (Connor 1) as P. Gabrielle Foreman calls it a "strategic essentialism" (Connor 1), which involves smacking down the sense of alienation, thus, emphasising the formation of self and identity. Cognising not only the concept of W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness" but also what it takes to be an African-American woman in America, Black women strive for their liberation of self, which is "not adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (Mann and Patterson 249). Homi K. Bhabha talks about the culture and suggests that "those who suffered the sentence of history— subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement" (Bhabha 172) teach us the "most enduring lessons for living and thinking"

(Bhabha 172). Thus, the urge to create a space of own is remarkably presented through the poem recited by a young child in Africa:

> When I born, I black;
> When I grow up I black;
> When I go in sun I black;
> When I scared, I black;
> When I sick, I black;
> And U White fellows;
> When U born, U pink;
> When U grow up, U white;
> When U go in sun, U red;
> When U cold, U blue;
> When U scared, U yellow;
> When U sick, U green;
> When U die, U grey;
> And U call me coloured? ("The Best Poem of 2006")

The UN's nomination of the poem as "The Best Poem of 2006" is a powerful statement against racism and its enduring impact on the lives of Black people. The poem is a rejoinder against racism, and its importance lies in its ability to challenge and subvert the racist attitudes that have historically been inflicted upon Black people. Written by an African child, the poem's appropriation and abrogation of the English language reflect a desire to create a space and identity and assert their own agency and empowerment. By juxtaposing the experience of being Black with the changing colours of White people, the poem highlights the absurdity and injustice of racial categories and labels and the harm that they can cause. The child's use of language serves as a form of resistance, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming agency and power in the face of oppression.

African-American Women's Plight in America

In the introduction of *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*, Houston A. Baker highlights a significant concern that how "[s]carcely more than a decade ago, a number of black spokesmen including literary critics— assumed it was our turn to speak" (Baker xi). But, this assertion of Blacks only includes Black men, thus, excluding Black women as hooks, too, challenges his idea as she says that "[w]hen black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women" (hooks, *Ain't* 7). The struggle for the existence of Black women has been a strenuous journey, be it

freedom or the intellectual struggle. hooks aptly represents the condition in which Black women are situated. Therefore, racial imperialism in White America makes the condition of Black women poets worse than Black men. Regarding women's rights and liberation, racism excludes Black women in their struggle for independence.

By re-narrating the life stories of Black women from history, these women poets try to associate their past and present experiences, thus finding a balance between mind and soul and providing the same to society. The poets struggle to liberate their female selves by providing articulation to the polyphonic voices. Melissa Harris-Perry aptly delineates the colossal deeds of Black women:

> The struggle for recognition is the nexus of human identity and national identity, where much of the most important work of politics occurs. African American women fully embody this struggle. By studying the lives of black women, we gain important insight into how citizens yearn for and work toward recognition. (Harris-Perry 4)

Despite facing significant obstacles and hostilities, African-American women have demonstrated resilience and strength in their efforts to create and discover their own identities as women. As Toni Morrison observes, these women had no established identity or cultural framework to rely on but instead had to forge their own paths in the face of "profound desolation of her reality, she may very well have invented herself" (Morisson qtd. in B. Smith 101). These women may have even invented themselves through their struggle, drawing on their unique experiences and perspectives to assert their agency and autonomy. The concept of sisterhood and solidarity became an essential aspect of feminism, but in the struggle for feminist rights, Black women were excluded from the struggle. Although they were banned, Black women stood brave and strong, fighting for their Black female subjectivity and the emancipation of Blacks.

Black women poets, through their verses, used their experiences and agonies as a tool to strengthen themselves. These women poets had always faced challenges in expressing their experiences due to the reception of White audiences. In the poem "The Second Sermon on the Warpland", Gwendolyn Brooks aptly calls African-American poetry a "furious flower", which figures out two significant contributions of African-American poetry: radical and aesthetic. Thus, Black women participated in the movements and created trends reviving their culture and ancestry.

Trends of the African-American Women's Poetry

According to Ong, the distinction between "purely oral art" (Ong qtd. in Pfeiler 16) and "verbal art forms" (Ong qtd. in Pfeiler 16) can be traced back to the literary works of both primary and secondary oral cultures. Further, Ong extends his view by saying that early written poetry is "mimicking in script of oral performance" (Ong qtd. in Pfeiler 20). From the 18th century odes to the blues, hip-hop, and rap culture, the function of race, the legal status of Black women, and poetics have played a vital part in configuring the establishment of African-American women's works. Thus, the poems blur the gaps between poetry and music, the performance and printing, enhancing African-American culture. The major trends in African-American women's poetry are as follows:

Oral Poetry

Oral poetry is a form of Black folk music that emerged in the American South in the 1900s as vocal songs, also known as the first pieces of the "pre-literate culture" (Jones 1). The origin of African-American slave songs began from the time of captivity. These religious songs, also known as Negro spirituals, are the earliest songs sung during the initial days of slavery by enslaved African-Americans. Black mothers and lovers used to compose poems through their lullabies and love songs. The originality of verses and forms through their oral tradition brought newness to poetry.

These songs, ballads, folk songs, gospels, spiritual, and blues signified the poets' urge for liberation and the willpower to incorporate "within the world all the elements of the divine" (Levine qtd. in Gates and McKay 5). However, even before Black women's poetry ushered as a genre, many such songs were unwritten, and some were lost. Over 6,000 slave songs were recorded by John Lovell Jr., making them an important contribution to American verse. Lucy Terry, an enslaved African poet, composed a ballad, *Bars Fight,* which chronicled the events and people of the 1796 battle delineating her mastery over poetry. Talking about the oral tradition, June Jordan talks about African-American women who "repeatedly sing for liberty…repeatedly lift witness to the righteous and the kindly factors" (Jordan qtd. in Mitchell and Taylor 15) of their day.

Many multi-ethnic countries, such as the United States of America, comprising poets of different colours, races, and others, delineate their voices representing their cultures and distinctive features. Arna Bontemps states how African-American verses:

> … sometimes seems hard to pin down…. From spirituals and gospels songs to blues, jazz and bebop, it is likely to be marked by certain special riff, an extra glide, a kick where none is expected, and a beat for which there is no notation. It follows the literary traditions of the language it uses, but it does not hold them sacred. As a result, there has been a tendency for critics to put it in a category by itself, outside the main body of American poetry. (Kramarae and Spender 1271)

Spirituals or negro spirituals, gospels, blues, secular rhymes, ballads, work songs, jazz, rap, sermons, and folktales are all parts of the vernacular tradition and the oral culture. These are the creations of enslaved Africans, and these were recorded after the slavery system was abolished. Ma Rainey was tagged as "The Mother of the Blues" ("Ma Rainey Biography") in the 18th century, and her music serves as an inspiration for great poets such as Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. With the advent of technologies during that era, such as radio, Blacks, in general, and Black women, in particular, gained a larger audience. One such example is Ma Rainey's "Black Bottom":

> Now, you heard the rest
> Ah, boys, I'm gonna show you the best
> Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom
>
> Way down south in Alabamy
> I got a friend, they call dancin' Sammy
> Who's crazy about all the latest dances
> Black bottom stomps and the Jew baby prances
>
> The other night at a swell affair
> Soon as the boys found out that I was there
> They said, "Come on, Ma let's go to the cabaret"
> Where that band you ought to hear me say"
>
> I want to see that dance you call the black bottom
> I wanna learn that dance
> Don't you see the dance you call your big black bottom
> That'll put you in a trance
>
> All the boys in the neighborhood
> They say your black bottom is really good
> Come on and show me your black bottom
> I want to learn that dance
>
> I want to see the dance you call the black bottom
> I want to learn that dance

Come on and show that dance you call your big black bottom
It puts you in a trance
Early last morning 'bout the break of day
Grandpa told my grandma, I heard him say
Get up and show your old man your black bottom
I want to learn that dance

Now I'm gonna show y'all my black bottom
They stay to see that dance
Wait until you see me do my big black bottom
I'll put you in a trance

Ah, do it ma, do it, honey
Look it now Ma, you getting' kinda rough here
You gotta be yourself now, careful now
Not too strong, not too strong, Ma

I done shown y'all my black bottom
You ought to learn that dance (Ma Rainey, "Black Bottom")

During this period, many classic Black female songwriters and singers emerged who performed, and these were the first recorded blues. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and others played a pivotal role in popularising the blues. In 1921, Mary Stafford was the first African-American woman to record for Columbia Records. Others, such as Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Katie Crippen, Edith Wilson, and Esther Bigeou, debuted through their first recordings by the end of the year. By providing a platform for self-expression and community-building, the blues helped to forge a sense of collective identity and empowerment that has had a lasting impact on the lives of Black women both historically and in the present day. As Patricia Hill Collins opines, "Blues was not just entertainment- it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of Black life in America" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 105).

Gospel music is deeply rooted in its origin; it can be traced to the 17th century. The hymns were sung in a call-and-response way in the churches. Along with their Black male counterparts, Mahalia Jackson emerged in the 20th century as the "Queen of Gospel" ("Mahalia Jackson"), becoming one of the greatest gospel singers and songwriters in the world who "sing[s] God's music because it makes me feel free. It gives me hope. With the blues when you finish, you still have the blues" ("Mahalia Jackson"). Popularly known as "the single most powerful black woman in the United States" ("Mahalia Jackson"), Mahalia Jackson recorded thirty albums throughout her career. Many Black women songwriters of the gospel, such as Sallie

Martin, Clara Ward, Willie Mae Ford Smith, Arizona Dranes, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Bessie Griffin, Cassietta George, Vanessa Bell Armstrong, Inez Andrews, Delois Barrett Campbell, Lillie Knauls, Lynda Randle, Pastor Shirley Caesar, Alicia Williamson, Irma Thomas, Patricia Louise Holt-Edwards, Yolanda Adams, Lisa McClendon, Kim Burrell, Roberta Martin, Le'Andria Johnson, Albertina Walker, CeCe Winans, and Aretha Louise Franklin set a new benchmark in the 20th century along with many Black female gospel groups, such as The Angelic Gospel Singers, Mary Mary, The Barrett Sisters, Dorothy Love Coates, Clara Ward Singers, The Davis Sisters, and The Caravans. Among these, some of the groups are still active. Contemporary Black women gospel writers are Vickie Winans, Judith Christie McAllister, Dorothy Norwood, Esther Ford, and Helen Baylor, amongst many others.

Jazz Poetry

Emerged in the 1920s, jazz poetry drew its source from the artistic meeting, which included operas, other European classical music, marching bands, work songs, and especially the blues. The literary genre of jazz poetry is characterised by poems infused with jazz music rhythms and themes. Many Black American writers have explored the subject of jazz music in their poetry, using its sounds and imagery to inform their own creative expression. Jazz music serves as a source of inspiration and a way to connect with the broader cultural and historical context of the Black experience. As a result, jazz poetry often incorporates musicality and improvisational spirit, infusing traditional poetic forms with a dynamic and distinctive voice:

> In defining the Black American identity, contemporary minority poetry has devoted itself to the ideas of freedom, protest, and cultural pride, and by dramatising the importance of jazz as part of a proud, ongoing cultural tradition, Black writers continually remind us of the close connection between poetry and music. (Dickson 29)

Modern African-American poetry has many similarities with that of the vernacular tradition or oral tradition of African-American music, especially the African-American musical genres like blues and jazz, making an indelible mark on the Harlem Renaissance to the present.

At the beginning of the 20th century, jazz and poetry merged to form a new art of expression. Though New Orleans was the birthplace of jazz, it spread across America. Along with African-American male poets, Black women poets contributed to this literary genre. Perhaps, the African-American

women poet Helene Johnson's "Poem" is the earliest poem on jazz which is published and re-published in James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (1989). Jennifer Ryan notes that African-American women's jazz poetry gained recognition in society and that the themes and structures of this poetry reflect a refusal to be marginalised. By participating in contemporary political discourse through their work, these poets use jazz-inspired techniques and themes to express the social issues black women face. These experimental literary techniques, grounded in a historically African-American cultural context, provide a powerful means for these poets to articulate their experiences and perspectives, challenging dominant narratives and asserting their rightful place in society:

> Such issues include nationally defined economic disparities, domestic abuse, body image, consumerism, women-centered histories, environmental conservation, and he problematic negotiation of black women's bodies through the often hostile geographies of modern society. (Ryan, *Post-Jazz* 12)

The known "matriarchs of Jazz" ("Black Women in Jazz"), such as Mary Lou Williams, Roberta Flack, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Mary Calhoun Horne, Ida Cox, Etta Jones, Billie Holiday, Alicia Keys, and others, have introduced Black women's issues, struggles in their works. Esperanza Emily Spalding, the jazz artist to win the Grammy Award for Best New Artist along with three more Grammy Awards, is fond of fusion music and greatly influenced by a "wonderful arc that started 40 years ago where people kept incorporating modern sounds into their music" ("Esperanza Spalding's debut"). Having been an "outsider", jazz poetry as an art form is conceptualised by African-Americans. This trend was preserved till the 1950s when the Beat generation poets came into the scenario. Later, in modern times, the jazz form was adopted into hip-hop music and performance poetry/poetry slams.

Beat Generation: Marginalised Women during the 1950s

Jack Kerouac introduced the phrase "Beat Generation" in 1948, which means beaten or trodden down African-Americans. But Jack Kerouac appropriated the term with a new concept associated with the "upbeat." Influenced by the American culture in the post-World War II period, the people aspired to value themselves and, thus, celebrated carefree lives, negating their responsibilities. The generation's focus was the rejection of common values, the liberation of human sexuality, and the exploration of

life. Rather than liberating from the social norms of Whites, Beat culture marginalises women and African-American women writers as well. Hettie Jones was among a few African-American women poets who contributed to this genre. The men of the 1950s worked in the form of brotherhood, mostly excluding and ignoring women poets' art of poetry.

Spoken Word

Spoken Word poetry started in the 1960s and was much more influenced by blues and originated from the Harlem Renaissance. The tradition of the spoken word is deeply connected with oral traditions across the globe, and it is primarily rooted in the African tradition. Modern spoken word poetry in America flourished during the 1980s and is very much prevalent in modern times. The most famous Black women of the spoken word are Patricia Smith, Sonya Renee Taylor, Jennifer Falu, Jaha Zainabu, Dominique Christina, Aja Monet, Angel Nafis, Safia Elhillo, Alysia Harris, Tonya Ingram, Aziza Barnes, Mahogany L. Browne, T. Miller, Nicole Homer, Ramona Lofton, Sunni Patterson, Chinaka Hodge, Sha Cage, and others. When a poem is read with all its visual and cognitive imagination, one experiences that:

> [r]eading a poem is like walking on silence— on volcanic silence. During the 1980s, performance poetry with the help of technology begins to gain popularity and it is also known as slam poetry. We feel the historic ground; the buried life of words. (Hartman qtd. in Pfeiler 77)

One such example is by Patricia Smith, who talks through the personas:

> They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty.
> It is knife-scrawled across my back in sore, jagged letters,
> it's in the way my eyes snap away from the obvious.
> I sit in my dim matchbox,
> on the edge of a bed tousled with my ragged smell,
> slide razors across my hair,
> count how many ways
> …. …. …. ….
> I sit here and watch niggers take over my TV set,
> walking like kings up and down the sidewalks in my head,
> walking like their fat black mamas named them freedom.
> My shoulders tell me that ain't right.
> So I move out into the sun
> where my beauty makes them lower their heads,
> or into the night
> with a lead pipe up my sleeve,

a razor tucked in my boot.
I was born to make things right.
…. …. …. ….
It's a kick to watch their eyes get big,
round and gleaming like cartoon jungle boys,
right in that second when they know
the pipe's gonna come down, and I got this thing
I like to say, listen to this, I like to say
"Hey, nigger, Abe Lincoln's been dead a long time." (Smith, "Skinhead")

The cyberspace, radio stations are used to broadcast performance poetry propagating African-American consciousness and its societal reformation. Talking about performance poetry, one can say that the reading of poetry bestows and puts forth new dimensions to it.

Slam poetry places equal emphasis on both verbal expression and physical performance. It is a type of poetry that is experienced when performed, with the sounds and physical aspects of the performance adding to its meaning. Additionally, Black women poets who perform slam poetry have been part of a more significant movement advocating for women's liberation. It highlights the importance of their unique perspective and voice within this art form. A quote from Pfeiler, "The way a poem sounds and its physical realisation of meaning contribute…" (Pfeiler 21), further emphasises this idea. One such example is Natasha T Miller's poem "Us, Black Women":

Us, Black women
Like samples at a grocery store
Set out to be picked over and never fully paid for

Us, Black women
With vaginas that still smell like unwanted mixed babies
Blood
And four hundred years of forced entries

And this nigga ask you
Can he hit it
As if it hasn't already been beaten
Outkast goes to court with Rosa Parks
Ludacris makes a diss record about Oprah
And rooms full of upstanding black men say, hell, we don't know what happened in that car
Rihanna may have given Chris Brown a REASON to beat her down
…. …. …. …. ….
Running over us
Stop treating us like samples at a grocery store

Do not touch us
If you have no plans on making this home. (Miller, "Us, Black Women")

Hip-Hop Poetry

The trend of Hip-Hop began during the 1970s, and it is divided chiefly into four different components— rap music (oral), turntablism or DJing (aural), b-boying (physical), and graffiti art (visual)— all of which depict different forms of the Black culture. Rapping is often associated with that hip-hop, and its roots are closely interlinked with blues music, work songs, and spirituals. Stylistically, rap is a part of the African-American dialect, which denotes musical style in the present times. Widely known as Black Arts Movement poets, Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez, and others have influenced rapping. Hip-hop allows Blacks to bring spiritual change, drawing its sources from vernacular tradition. The music celebrates the Black musical style and rejoices in the poetry of the human soul in a more rocking and harmonious way. Since the beginning of the hip-hop culture in the 1970s, women have been in the limelight in shaping this genre through break dance, rap, and graffiti art. Still, female accomplishments were ignored as soon as rapping conquered the industry as the highest-grossing genre. Thus, rap became popular for glamour, wealth, and unadulterated objectification of Black women's sexuality rather than its traditional roots. In hip-hop culture, the role of Black women is both powerful and controversial. The image of a Black female body is seen as an over-sexualised being, which seems like an object of the male gaze. Pough, Richardson, and Durham talk about "Many of hip-hop's 'woman problems' [which] come in the monolithic and repetitious representation of hip-hop as simply a sexist male rapper surrounded by an entourage of nameless and faceless gyrating bodies in the video after video" ("Representation of black"). Representation of women of colour in hip-hop signifies a misogynist culture, which is one of the modes of women's oppression. Joan Morgan explains the need to give a new direction to Black feminism by organising a Black feminist movement.

Further, she extends her argument by saying, "At the heart of our generation's ambivalence about the f-word is black women's historical tendency to blindly defend any black man who seems to be under attack from white folk" (J. Morgan 54). Rarely can one find the independence of Black women in the industry, thereby lessening the competition of male rappers.

In 1995, Queen Latifah created history by winning a Grammy Award for her innovatory hit, "U.N.I.T.Y." The song articulates against the domestic violence and objectification of Black female sexuality, establishing the

powerful voices of Black women rappers in the male-dominated genre. Marcyliena Morgan talks about how Black women in hip-hop question the stereotypical attitudes and the representation of the over-sexualised Black female body, reminding people that:

> there are many examples of women challenging misogyny and developing strategies to increase women's participation in hip-hop, dominant society is not particularly interested in this form of womanhood and feminism. While hip-hop women are committed to representing their lives and compete equally with men, their quest is not without peril and retaliation. (M. Morgan 148)

Thus, by participating in hip-hop, Black women are standing in a "male-dominated genre where they compete with men, regularly dispute male perspectives, and endure they [sic] sexist and misogynist comments about women while representing an array of female perspectives and defending their right to do so" (M. Morgan 135).

Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott, Erykah Badu, Queen Latifah, Mariah Carey, and Holly Bass are among those Black women rappers who broke the stereotypical notions, creating their stature in the hip-hop culture. Patricia Hill Collins' discourse on the ideologies of hegemonic power also operates to subjugate Black women. The construction of a Black female body continues to exist in the media as those stereotypes, i.e., "hot momma" or "Jezebel", create a demand for a female rapper who should have a maintained body that pleases the eye along with the ability to perform. Holly Bass' "Black Broadway" sets an example as it presents the Black tradition, which is imbibed with postmodernist aspects:

> I was walking down this lovely street called U
> also known as Black Broadway
> self-proclaimed world's most jazziful byway
> checkin out the partays
> as the music slips under my skin
>
> This road so black and beautiful
> sidewalks wide
> make it easy for hips to glide gracefully
> as brothers sweetly croon…
> (to the tune of Moody's Mood)
> *"Can I go, can I go, can I go…*
> *Shorty, you are the one who makes me lose my control…"*
> Well, it's easy to dream when you're feeling the scene
> a little jazz & gogo, jazz & gogo, jazz & gogo on U Street

Sardines… and pork & beans! whaaaat?
Sardines… and pork & beans!
…. …. …. ….
Sunny days, chasing the clouds away
friendly neighbors where we used to play
can you tell me how to get
how to get to
U Street (Bass, "Black Broadway")

Morgan expresses that she desired a form of feminism that did not solely focus on concepts such as "brothers", "male domination", and "patriarchy." Instead, she sought feminism that would enable her to delve into women's identities without portraying them as victims. Morgan's ideal feminism would acknowledge the multifaceted nature of being a Black girl in the present-day era, specifically as "part of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul, Hip Hop generation" (J. Morgan 56-57), and celebrate its powerful richness and delightful complexities.

Thus, these above-listed women poets showcase their visibility through their works, articulating their presence in front of Blacks and Whites. Therefore, the women poets create a new landmark in the history of African-American women's poetry.

Anthologies of African-American Male and Female Poets

The primary concern of the writings by women is whether they can genuinely write something substantial of some worth. Regarding this, history unveils the reality of how women writers concealed their identities so that they could publish their writings. Many female writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries preferred pseudo-names to publish their works as the literary world was not considered the arena for women. Nevertheless, Black women confronted more exclusion based on their race and gender. This isolation is not only from the academic world but also from their fundamental human rights. Therefore, the feminist theory in the U.S. stood complicated because it excluded Black women's issues in the feminist struggle. In a society dominated by both Whites and patriarchy, Black women were often excluded from discussions of gender and race. White feminists, for example, would frequently write about the "woman question", making analogies between "women" and "Black." However, because analogies derive their power from bringing together two disparate phenomena, White women's failure to acknowledge the existence of Black women as a distinct group and the overlap between the terms "Blacks" and

"women" made this analogy unnecessary. As bell hooks notes, the erasure of Black women's experiences and identities in discussions of gender and race perpetuated their marginalisation and reinforced existing power dynamics:

> … overlap between the terms "blacks" and "women" (that is the existence of black women) would render this analogy unnecessary. By continuously making this analogy, they unwittingly suggest that to them the term "woman" is synonymous with "white women" and the term "blacks" synonymous with "black men". (hooks, *Ain't* 8)

Among Blacks, very few women poets could get recognition and could publish their works. In the most hostile conditions, Black women poets marched with utmost courage to strive for their rights. Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* belittles Phillis Wheatley's poems:

> Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (Jefferson qtd. in Gates and McKay xxxi)

Phillis Wheatley, an African girl who had been brought to America as an enslaved person, was summoned by prominent individuals in Boston to take an oral exam that would determine her future and career prospects when she was only eighteen years old. After the examination, Wheatley's book of poems was published, which contained a preface signed by several people who attested that she wrote the poems. The preface described Wheatley as a "young Negro Girl Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa" (Gates and McKay xxxii) and had been serving as a slave in a family in Boston. Although Wheatley was disadvantaged as a slave, she was evaluated by some of the most skilled judges who concluded that she could write the poems in the book.

In the later years, Louis Simpson nullifies the achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks in the *New York Herald Tribune* as he doubts whether "it is possible for a Negro to write well" (Henderson 6) without revealing the identity of the poet and further stating, "if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important" (Henderson 6). The stereotypical attitude towards Blacks was prevalent during this period, but Black women continued to strive for their status and stature in society.

James Weldon's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) includes poets such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Edwin Campbell, James D. Corrothers, Daniel Webster Davis, William H.A. Moore, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Marion McClellan, William Stanley Braithwaite, George Reginald Margetson, James Weldon Johnson, John Wesley Holloway, Leslie Pinckney Hill, Ray G. Dandridge, Edward Smyth Jones, Fenton Johnson, R. Nathaniel Dett, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude McKay, Joseph Cotter Jr., Roscoe C. Jamison, Jessie Fauset, Anne Spencer, Alex Rogers, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Charles Bertram Johnson, Otto Leland Bohanan, Theodore Henry Shackleford, Lucian B. Watkins, Benjamin Brawley, and Joshua Henry Jones Jr. presents the ratio of only four Black female poets in comparison to twenty-five Black male poets. David Perkins' *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (1987) contains an article, "Black Poets of America", where only one Black woman poet (Gwendolyn Brooks) is named, that too, a renowned one, in comparison to the other three Black male poets (Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka). Black anthologies such as Dudley Randall's *Black Poetry: A Supplement to Anthologies which Exclude Black Poets* (1969), Lindsay Patterson's *A Rock Against the Wind: Black Love Poems: An Anthology* (1973), Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets: A New Anthology* (1985), Joan R. Sherman's *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (1992), Lindsay Patterson's *A Rock Against the Wind: African-American Poems and Letters of Love and Passion* (1996), Joan R. Sherman's *African-American Poetry: An Anthology: 1773-1927* (1997), Keith Gilyard's *Spirit and Flame: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* (1997), Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Black Poets of the Twenties* (1998), Michael S. Harper's *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000), Arnold Adoff's *I am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by African Americans* (2002), Arnold Rampersad's *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry* (2006), Nikky Finney's *Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* (2007), Lauri Ramey's *The Heritage Series of Black Poetry, 1962-1975: A Research Compendium* (2008), Camille T. Dungy's *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), Ja Jahannes' *Black Gold: An Anthology of Black Poetry* (2014), and others showcase the position of Black women poets whose contributions are comparatively less than Black male poets. Few Black women poets have been recorded in the poetry anthologies delineating a poor picture of the African-American Black women poets as "Numbers don't lie" (B. Page). The absence of African-American poets in collections is a grave problem, as addressed by Camille Dungy in a 2010 interview for the "Oakland Tribune": "I miss seeing writers of color in the

conversation. Until we have greater variety in the conversation— it is a monologue" ("Camille T. Dungy", Poetry Foundation).

Amid the harsh environment prevalent in American society, African-Americans, particularly Black women, have somehow managed to articulate their sorrows through their verses. Black women true up their compasses to enunciate their works of art, creating their own space in society. It is not implausible to achieve that terrain as several generations of Black women poets have been probing to gain identity in the community, and they have been steadily working towards it. While things have been changing, and there is a growing number of works that challenge the canon, poetry anthologies like Karen McCarthy's *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry* (1998) and Emmanuel E. Egar's *Black Women Poets of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003) have brought about some reformation in contemporary times. Even in the larger context, research shows that inequality between men and women prevails in American literary society. *Vida*, an American organisation for women, found "gender imbalances" where women face difficult circumstances to establish themselves. In such cases, women of colour who are segregated and treated as "unequal" find it more arduous to set themselves as writers.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Black women poets garnered attention worldwide. Maya Angelou read her poem at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. It made Angelou the first Black person to read a poem at a presidential inauguration. After a few years, another African-American woman poet, Elizabeth Alexander, read her poetry at the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama. Over the centuries, Black women poets have extended their question of racial boundaries through their poems.

Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Joyce Carol Thomas, Jayne Cortez, and others became very notable figures of African-American poetry of this era. In the 1970s, Black Arts Movement bestowed a new America as *Time* magazine defines it as a "single most controversial moment in the history of African-American literature— possibly in American literature as a whole" ("A Brief Guide"). The movement helped African-Americans to establish their own publishing houses, journals, and art institutions. During the Black Arts Movement, African-American women poets, like their male counterparts, rejected traditional White forms of poetry and instead created a vibrant body of work based on their own experiences. Their poetry revitalised the culture and asserted their liberation in American society. Among the most prominent women poets who participated in the movement are Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou. When poetry began

to appear in public spaces, it created new paradigms in music and theatre. Poetry fulfilled a crucial role in the Black Arts Movement by encouraging the expression of self-consciousness and the concept of identity as "one people." Several Black women poets, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Rita Dove, have received the Pulitzer Prize for their works. These poets used vernacular voices, and their discourse helped elevate the status of African-American women in America. Through this survey, I aim to understand the various research that has been conducted on the works of Black female poets and how these poets express themselves from a position of marginalisation.

Mapping of African-American Women Poets since the 1980s

The African-American women poets present the Black culture and heritage, voicing Black female experiences. I have considered the women poets who changed the scenario of American society. It is not possible to include the herstories of all Black women around the world, nor can all their voices be represented. Therefore, this section will present a limited list of Black women poets who have fought for their self-expression since the 1980s. These poets have contributed to African-American and American poetry, paving the way for their recognition on a larger scale and reclaiming their subjectivity. One finds a beautiful assemblage of tradition and modernity in their expressions, and they try to subvert the patriarchal attitudes toward Black women. I have been attempting to map the Black women poets since the 1980s, showcasing their invisibility in the genre of American poetry at large. Here is a list of those poets who attempted and, to some extent, revolutionised American society.

Senior editor of the Lotus Press, Naomi Long Madgett (1923-2020), was an award-winning poet. She has published many collections, including *One and the Many: Poems* (1956), *Midway* (1956), *Star by Star: Poems* (1965), *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon new poems, 1965-1971* (1972), *Exits and Entrances* (1978), *Phantom Nightingale: Juvenilia Poems 1934-1943* (1981), *Octavia and Other Poems* (1988), *Remembrance of Spring: Collected Early Poems* (1993), and *Connected Islands: New and Selected Poems* (2004). The collection *Octavia and Other Poems* (1988) is the national co-winner of the College Language Association Creative Achievement Award. A poet, and teacher, Naomi Long Madgett writes in the foreword of *Phantom Nightingale: Juvenilia Poems 1934-1943*: "I do