
BLACK FEMALE POWER THROUGH LIFE WRITING

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Abstract: The reading of African American life writings reveals how Black women's self perception is influenced by the prevailing ideology, especially the racist and sexist ideologies. Through an in depth study of the life writings of some Black women writers, my paper would analyze the racist and sexist mechanisms of oppression that these women are subjected to in American society. It seeks to establish that the act of writing the autobiography offers a powerful impetus to black female agency and that it strikes at the ideological roots of patriarchy.

Introduction: 'Black is beautiful'. Since all African Americans tend to believe and take pride in this dictum, the term "Black" will, for the purpose of this treatise, be used to refer to African Americans. Despite all that has been written about the narratives of black women one wonders whether the worth of all the diaries, pamphlets, memoirs and autobiographies of Black women have been justifiably assessed as a whole. Should all such writings be treated as a separate genre as suggested by John Brexton? In this study of many voices of Black women the purpose is not to undermine all the critical observations about Black women's literature or to answer the question raised by John Brexton. In fact the vowed purpose of this study of Black women's narratives and personal writings is to stress the need for an uncondescending and unprejudiced but comprehensive reassessment of the irrepressible endeavors of so many Black women to sanctify their womanhood despite being subjected to the ignominy of slavery and its offshoots after the abolition of slavery. Indeed this survey seeks to underline what these autobiographies collectively record. Humanity can perhaps never forget all that Black women have gone through because of slavery: harrowing poverty, savage defilement of their modesty by brutal rapists; stigmatization by wicked racists, contemptuous discrimination by sexists among their own race and the heart wrenching experiences of witnessing the lynching of friends and relatives and their unmitigated suffering at being torn asunder from their dearest ones by merciless slave dealers and tyrannical masters. Therefore this survey seeks to explore to what extent Phillis Wheatley, the first Black woman to be published was able to envision the true worth of the Negro race and Negro women in particular when she wrote the following verse in an autobiographical poem:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."

Remember, Christian, Negroes, black as Cain, May be
refin'd and join th' angelic train. (qtd. in *On Being Brought from Africa to America*) Kate Cannon observed that Black women live out a moral wisdom that is different from that of Black men because of the uniqueness of Black women's vulnerability and

exploitation and this observation leads us to this survey of the autobiographies of Black women which seeks to establish that the act of writing the autobiography offer a powerful impetus to black female agency and that it strikes the ideological roots of patriarchy.

Sojourner truth: (1797 -1883): The life and deeds of Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree) truly illustrate the Black Women's trials as a slave and the resolute spirit with which she fought against the various forms of exploitation devised by white masters. Sojourner Truth's *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* was published in 1850. Sojourner Truth was illiterate. Therefore, her autobiography was published as a work dictated to her, edited by Olive Gilbert and printed on her behalf by J.B. Yerrinton and Son. This autobiography by proxy was written thirty three years before her death and much before her well documented struggle as an abolitionist. The preface to this remarkable narrative underlines her sufferings and highlights her indomitable spirit. It serves as a prelude to what she ultimately achieved as a crusade for the emancipation of slaves in America. It is worth quoting her as it not only serves the purpose of this survey of giving credence to the quintessential elements in Black women's personal writings, but also presents a panoramic account of the trials and tributaries faced by black women slaves.

The following is the unpretending narrative of the life of a remarkable and meritorious woman- a life which has been checkered by strange vicissitudes, serve hardships, and singular adventures. Born a slave, and held in the brutal condition until the entire abolition of slavery in the state of New York in 1827, she has known what it is to drink to the dregs the bitterest cup of human degradation. That one thus placed on a level with cattle and swine, and for so many years subjected to the most demoralizing influences, should have retained her moral integrity to such extent, and cherished so successfully the religious sentiment in her soul, shows a mind of no common order, while it heightens the detestation that is felt in every humane bosom, of that system of oppression which seeks to cripple the intellect, impair the understanding, and deprave the hearts of its victims- a system which has subjected to its own foul

purposes, in the United States, all that is wealthy, talented, influential, and reputedly pious, in an overwhelming measure! (*Narrative of Sojourner Truth* Preface)

In 1851, one year after the publication of her narrative, Sojourner Truth made her extemporaneous speech at the Ohio Women's Right Convention 'Ain't I a Woman'. 'Ain't I a Woman' in due course became the slogan of all Black Women who raised their voice against slavery.

Harriet Ann Jacob: (1813 – 1897): It is in Harriet Ann Jacob's autobiography of 1861 that we do not glimpse but with wide-eyed horror perceives all the atrocities Black women suffered when slavery plagued the Negro race in the USA. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the microcosm that enables us to comprehend the macrocosm of slavery. This autobiography is an account of one woman's astounding efforts to escape from the tentacles of slavery and this is what rivets our attention. Nevertheless, the book brings us face to face with the leviathan of slavery. One cannot but marvel at the ingenuity with which she ultimately fooled the monster that continued to prey on her people. People like Harriet Jacobs and her grandmother prove the saying that God made mothers because He could not be everywhere. This is the most heartening thing in her tale of relentless struggle for survival in a world of miserable predicaments that surfaced with inexorable force every time she contemplated her freedom. Her labors to escape from her viciously predatory master were undoubtedly herculean but she punctuates her autobiography with earnest and humble appeals to white folks to understand her predicament.

Lucy Delaney (1830 – 1891): *From the Darkness cometh the Light, or Struggle for Freedom* is the title of the narrative of Lucy Ana Delaney published in 1891. Delaney's memoir, written at the age of 61, records the history of her mother Polly who was the first Black woman to win her freedom through a law suit. Polly also filed suit for the freedom of her daughter and ultimately Lucy, at the age 14, was adjudged Polly's legitimate daughter. Lucy goes on to narrate how she and her mother were united in Canada with her sisters Nancy who had managed to escape earlier. In the final chapter Lucy narrates how she was despite her happy marriage, destined to suffer tragedy. Four years afterward (1945), I became the wife of Zachariah Delany, of Cincinnati, with whom I have had a happy married life, continuing forty-two years. Four children were born to us, and many were the plans we mapped out for their future, but two of our little girls were called from us while still in their childhood. My remaining daughter attained the age of twenty-two years, and left life behind, while the brightest of prospects was hers, and my son, in the fullness of a promising youth, at the

age of twenty four, "turned his face to the wall". So my cup of bitterness was full to the brim and overflowing: yet one consolation was always mine! Our children were born free and died free! Their childhood and my maternity were never shadowed with a thought of separation. The grim reaper did not spare. (*From the Darkness cometh the Light or the Struggle for freedom*, 58).

Delaney's autobiography is not just another tale of slavery and exploitation but also the story of a mother who girded up her loins to fight for her right to her daughter and also to set her free.

Kate Drumgoold (1858 – 1898): The proverbial truth that women build homes is irrefutably established in the autobiographies written by slave women. These autobiographies are eloquently expressive of the agony that slave mother went through and the anguish of their children when they were separated from their mothers. Kate Drumgoold's autobiography *A Slave Girl's Story, Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* glorifies the matriarchal role the author's mother played in clinging to her family (her husband, one son and seventeen daughters) with stoic faith when she was cruelly separated from them. Her owner chose to sell her away when Kate Drumgoold was quite young. If Kate Drumgoold praise of her own Black mother is truly eloquent, no less articulate is her acknowledgement of her debt to her white mother. In fact, Kate's adoration of her two mothers and the agony she felt at their death are the highlights of her autobiography. Kate's admiration for all the gentle white folks who came to her rescue in moments of dire need is always associated with her inalienable faith in God.

Anne Moody (1940 – 2015): In Anne Moody's autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* there is a firsthand account of all the ills Black men and women were exposed to during the 1950's and 1960's. Unlike the spiritual faith that Sojourner Truth and others had in God, Moody rebelled against God because she felt that there was no God to prevent all the poverty, lynching, sexual abuse, racial discrimination and intimidation that African-American citizens were exposed to in USA. Even when John F. Kennedy was president and Democrats talked of racial equality there was enough repression and liquidation of Black Americans for Moody to lose faith in God and write in her autobiography of 1968. Anne Moody was actively involved in with the Congress of Racial Equality and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Although she married a white man, Moody has begun to hate the perpetrators of violence against Black at the young age of 15. The tone of her second autobiographical attempt *Farewell to Sweet* is less bitter but it is a befitting sequel to *Coming of Age in Mississippi* which had already

established her reputation as a prominent member of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and had won her critical acclaim and accolades besides bagging significant awards. Anne Moody was an implacable foe of the inhuman practice of lynching.

Angela davis (1944 -): Angela Davis, who was Professor at University of California, experienced the vicissitudes of life and can truly be called a champion of Black Feminism. Two of her books testify to this view. They are *Women Culture and Politics* written in 1990 and *Women Race and class* which was written much earlier in 1983. A close associate of the Black Panthers and a member of the Communist Party that backed her candidature for the Vice Presidency of the US in 1980, Angela Davis travels began when she was wrongly implicated in the murder of a judge and a few others. She became a fugitive to escape arrest but was finally arrested and imprisoned. In fact, she was at one time in the most wanted list of the FBI before her arrest. Her arrest generated wide publicity and stirred up an inspired campaign for her release and she was finally acquitted by a white jury. Her autobiography, written in 1989, tells the story of struggles in early life and presents all the facts of the sensational murder; her fight against the injustice meted out to her and the celebrations after her acquittal. This is an autobiography that underlines the antagonism directed at the Black community and the persecution of innocent African- Americans who often rot in jail.

Patrice gaines (1950 -): The bestselling memoir *Laughing in the Dark- From colored girl to woman of color, a journey from prison to power* written by Patrice Gaines and first published in 1994 concludes this short survey of autobiographies and memoirs written by African American women by which they found their voice. Like a number of other Black women autobiographers before her, Patrice Gaines

had rough and tough experiences in her life. Rape, brutal beatings, imprisonment did not cow down her spirit. On the contrary, she fought against all odds to emerge a veteran journalist, and a writing coach and a fine orator. *Laughing in the Dark* is candidly written. Patrice Gaines makes no bones of her sex life, her drug addiction, her unsuccessful marriages and her suffering on account of institutionalized racism. She imperiled her own life by her self-destructive behavior but psychotherapy helped her to the turn critical corner and rediscover and reform herself. Her stated purpose in telling the story of his life was to inspire other women to throw off the slough of despondency and redeem their lives.

Conclusion: What emerges from all these outpourings of Black women is summed up in a simple statement of Harriet Jacobs made in her autobiography "Slavery is terrible for me; but it is far more terrible for women." (Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl 66) This is indeed an understatement. Impartially considered from a humanitarian point of view, slavery was a veritable Inferno for woman-woman who never consciously sinned against God but were condemned to a living in hell because they were deemed to be Black as Erebus by those who perversely believe in Satan and blasphemed their own religion. These women, particularly those who were born slaves or born free during the days of slavery have anchored faith in Christianity. All of them attributed their moral strength to Christ. Harriet Tubmen writing echoes what they lived out in their lives. "Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, the passion to reach for the stars to change the world". So Phillis Wheatley was indeed right when she envisioned that the sable woman of her race would one day "joined the angelic train".

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