



**Islamic Azad University
Tehran Central Branch
Faculty of Foreign Languages**

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of
the Degree of Ph.D. in English Literature

**A Deconstructive Reading of
Five Major Feminist Novels
by African-American Women Writers**

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Summer 2012

**In the name of God,
the Compassionate, the Merciful**

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Abstract

The present research has set for its goal the study of African-American literature, focusing on Black feminism, especially on the literature produced from the Harlem Renaissance on into the postmodern era. The selected novels cover a wide range of authors, starting with Zora Neale Hurston, continuing through Alice Walker, and reaching to two contemporary writers, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones in order to demonstrate some common features of the literature they represent. The crucial issues addressed in this study are ‘identity’ and ‘discourse’. Identity has been studied as existing at the intersection of gender, race, and class. The constituents of identity are used by the dominant class to oppress and marginalize some minority groups who then deconstruct identity categories to demarginalize themselves. To achieve this goal, a typical strategy devised and employed, especially by Black women is using what I have termed ‘the discourse of abnormalities’.

The main argument of the present dissertation focuses on how Black women can jump outside the restrictions and prescriptions of the white patriarchy in order to claim identity and gain voice once they are frustrated with both the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement since neither addresses the intersectionality of oppression; thus, Black women are in dire need of a movement that can address the combination of problems — racial, sexual, and class — faced by Black women in order to set them free from the multiple layers of oppression. The tool adopted for reading the literature under study is ‘Derridian deconstruction’ whose revolutionary energies make it the fittest for the study of the revolutionary Black Feminism.

Key Words: Deconstruction, Black Feminism, identity, discourse of abnormalities, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones

Dedication

I do not dedicate this to the ones I love,

I dedicate my love instead.

Acknowledgment

No doubt, I would never have been able to finish my dissertation without the valuable guidance and assistance of several precious personalities, help from some willing friends, and support of a loved one. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Shide Ahmadzade my thesis advisor for her invaluable guidance and careful patience in correcting my writings. I would like to thank most sincerely Dr. Kiyan Soheil my first thesis reader for his constant encouragement and for his willingness to give his best suggestions. I would eternally be grateful to Professor Jalal Sokhanvar my second thesis reader who has always been my inspiration and whose determinative comments have changed my life and career for the best. It would be matter of injustice if I do not thank wholeheartedly (in alphabetical order) Dr. Alireza Farahbakhsh, Dr. Alireza Jafari, Dr. Amirali Nojoomian, and Dr. Reza Yavarian for their valuable comments, which have greatly improved my writing. Especial thanks should be given to Mr. Ahmad Abbasi, my friend, who in the past few years has sacrificed time and energy in willingly finding and taping an impressive amount of reading materials required for the completion of this study. Many thanks should go to Mr. Abdullah Rabi'e who has with utmost care and patience typed this dissertation off the tape. Finally yet importantly, kind thanks should be offered to my family and all the loved ones who have out of mercy put up with the hardships accompanying the accomplishment of this study.

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 General Background

To get a clear picture of Black feminism, we have to work our way through the African-American literature of which it is a part. African-American literature is a designation for the bulk of literature produced in America by writers of African descent. The genre roots back to the works of the late 18th century writer, Phillis Wheatley, reaching its culmination with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance, and continuing today with such postmodern authors as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Gayl Jones. The typical issues treated in African-American literature include the role of African-Americans within the American society, their language, and their identity. The literature has largely borrowed from oral forms such as blues, jazz, and rap. Today, after almost a century of ceaseless effort by African-American theorists, writers, and critics, African-American literature has become part and parcel of American literature.

Essentially, African-American literature constitutes an important section of post-colonial literature, even though some scholars deny it by stating that “African

American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community who reside within a nation of vast wealth and economic power” (Mohanram and Rajan 135). Significantly, there is opposition to using Western literary theory in analyzing African-American literature. As Henry Louis Gates Jr., a prominent African-American literary scholar, says: “My desire has been to allow the Black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without” (*Signifying* XIX).

Since African-American literature is richly varied in nature, it is usually, for ease of study, periodized, beginning with the slave narrative which appeared in the middle of the 19th century. In this period, the controversy over slavery took two opposing directions: the anti-slavery position represented by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and the pro-slavery viewpoint represented by the so-called Anti-Tom literature by white, southern writers like William Gilmore Simms. To depict the reality of slavery, a number of ex-slaves such as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass wrote slave narratives, which soon became an integral part of African-American literature.

After the abolition and the American Civil War (1861–1865), a number of African-American authors still continued to write about the condition of African-Americans. This period came to be known as post-slavery era. These early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a significant increase in the literary production of novels, plays, poetry, and short stories by African-American authors as well as an increase in the scholarly efforts in the humanities and social sciences, appearing in the form of Black societies and Black press. These developments must be viewed against the calamities of the Age of Racial Segregation, calamities such as violence, discrimination, economic oppression, and psychological warfare. Indeed, Black

literary activities were promoted as a means of developing collective or group protest against the inhuman conditions facing African-Americans. Julius E. Thompson in her “Identity, protest, Outreach in the Arts” lists 21 significant voices among Black men and women thinkers, writers, scholars, and leaders of this period (476), of whom the most prominent is W. E. B. Du Bois (1868 – 1963), who at the turn of the century published a highly influential collection of essays, titled *The Souls of Black Folk*. The book contains Du Bois’s famous quotation: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (19).

Another major Black literary period is generally referred to as the Harlem Renaissance — also called the Black Renaissance — which spans from 1920 to 1940. This cultural movement holds a special position in the African-American history. This period witnessed an enormous outpouring of literary, historical, and artistic productions by Blacks in the America with Harlem, New York, serving as the matrix of the movement. Seeking to escape the harsh consequences of American racism in the South, many Blacks took their talents and skills with them to the North. Black writers, artists, intellectuals, and leaders were mainly attracted to New York City, because of its economic, cultural, and political importance. Although the Harlem Renaissance is considered as a large cultural movement, it is especially remembered for its literature. The Harlem Renaissance marks indeed a watershed in African-American literature since with the Renaissance, African-American literature, Black fine art, and dramatic art became an integral part of American culture and literature. After this time, scholar Nathan Irvin Huggins notes that “the very name [the Harlem Renaissance] continued to connote a special spirit, new vitality, black urbanity, and black militancy. Through the activities, the writings, the promotion of Negroes in the 1920s, Harlem had become a racial focal point for knowledgeable black men [and women] the world over” (303).

Langston Hughes was the major poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His literary output was enormous covering poetry, drama, fiction, autobiography, and essay. In one of his finest essays entitled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” printed in *The Nation* (1926), Hughes writes: “we younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (The journal has no pagination). Hughes served as a model for postmodernist Blacks such as Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka. He was in fact the first Black American to write civil-rights protest poetry when it was quite dangerous to do so.

Zora Neale Hurston is considered among the prominent writers of the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to writing novels, nonfiction works, and numerous short stories and essays, Hurston is recognized as the first modern African-American who has collected and published folklore. Her famous *Mules and Men* (1935) contains African-American folktales collected for her anthropological studies. The tales offer vital messages for survival in a racist society. In her works, she refuses to accept the limitations of the Black experience; instead, she focuses upon the creativity and imaginative power of African-Americans and celebrates their Black cultural heritage. Hurston is best remembered for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Her works for sometime slid into obscurity for a number of reasons until Alice Walker’s article, “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston”, brought new interest for her works. The revival of Hurston’s works accompanied by the emergence of authors such as Morrison, Angelou, and Walker prepared the way toward Black feminism whose focus of attention is the Black female experience.

During the Harlem Renaissance, Black intellectuals were faced with the following major issues and themes. In this period, Black artists were hesitant in their choice of audience; they wondered whether they had to seek respectability from an

American or from a Black audience in their struggle for Black literary achievement. Black intellectuals were trying to find out a way for expressing Black pride and racial consciousness in their artistic works. The type of protest to be employed in Black literary productions, and the role Black Americans could play in anti-colonial struggles was a major concern of the period. At the same time, Black women were involved in devising new strategies for voicing their oppression. Finally, the restrictive choice of Black topics and Black publishing companies was another major issue occupying the mind of many writers.

The Civil Rights Movement era (1955–1968) constitutes another major period in the growth and development of African-American literature and culture. In this period, Black literary activities continued as in the Harlem Renaissance, but at a slower pace. The large migration of African-Americans which had occurred earlier in the century helped produce a new sense of independence in the Black community. It also helped the growth of the American Civil Rights Movement that in turn powerfully influenced Black writers of the 1940s to 60s.

One of the first writers who protested against segregation and racism and created a new sense of Black Nationalism was Richard Wright. The critic Blyden Jackson called this era “the Age of Wright” (203) since Wright was the most outstanding Black writer and thinker of the time. Wright is best known for his 1940 novel *Native Son*, whose protagonist Bigger Thomas, is a Black man who struggles for acceptance in Chicago.

The other great novelist of this period is Ralph Ellison, best known for his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), whose publication secured his place in literary history. The Civil Rights period also witnessed the emergence of female Black poets, most notably Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the first African-American to win the Pulitzer

Prize for her 1949 book of poetry, *Annie Allen*. It is also worth noting that a number of important essays and books about human rights were published by the leaders of this Movement, a notable example is “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr. In general, the dominant mood of the period was critical of American society and of the continued harsh realities facing Blacks in America.

Black intellectuals were still facing many of the same major issues and themes as in the Harlem Renaissance. They were struggling to decide what role protest themes should play in Black artistic productions. They were concerned with the way the lives of Black people were to be reflected in Black literature and arts. Another major concern of the period was with the place the Black consciousness could have in African-American literature. The Black intellectuals of the period were also trying to decide what steps The Civil Rights Movement should take to benefit the Black Americans.

As books by Black writers from 1970s on began to achieve best-selling and award-winning status, African-American literature gradually joined the mainstream in American literature. During this period, a highly influential movement which greatly helped define and promote African-American literature was the Black Arts Movement. Like the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, at the last quarter of the century saw a revival of all Black arts in America. Poet and critic Larry Neal has remarked: “a central reason for the Black Arts Movement was a need to promote artistic responsibility to a Black community, employing an aesthetic derived from Black experience” (222). With the rapid production and publication of Black poetry, novels, essays, short stories and plays, there came developments in Black press and publishing companies, which published and critiqued the new works. The Black press and publishers contributed to the growth of the Black Arts Movement.

An influential African-American figure of the Black Arts Movement was LeRoi Jones now known as Amiri Baraka who demanded a change in society, but especially in outlook among Blacks concerning their positions in American society.

During this period, Black women became more open in demanding their rights in their struggle against racism, sexism, and classicism in society. In fact, Black women intellectuals appeared during this period as major figures in the production of Black arts. At the same time, a number of Black women scholars and writers helped promote and define African-American literature as an accepted genre including Morrison, Walker, and Jones. Morrison worked from 1960s to 70s as an editor for Random House where she edited books by such authors as Toni Cade Bambara and Jones. Morrison herself would later emerge as one of the most influential African-American writers of the 20th century. Among her most famous novels is *Beloved* (1987), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. It tells the story of a mother slave who found freedom but killed her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery.

The novelist and poet Walker is generally credited with reviving Hurston and her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In 1982, she won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple* written the same year, an epistolary novel that tells the story of Celie who at the age of fourteen is sexually abused by her presumed father and then is married off to a man who further abuses her. The 1970s also witnessed other African-American books topping the best-seller lists among which *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976) by Jones are the first to be mentioned. The kind of language that stems from the call-and-response of Black sermons, the improvisational motifs of jazz, the repetitions of the blues, the African-American dialects and colloquialisms characterized much of her work. In her novels,

Jones seems to be highly interested in treating the relationships between daughters, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers in terms of shared history, victimization, and responsibility for the future, traceable back to the strong influence of her mother as well as that of her grandmother. Jones especially remembers her mother's emphasis upon her own responsibility for making generations, a theme evident in *Corregidora*. These qualities place Jones's writing firmly within African-American literature. Other important writers in recent years include literary fiction writers such as Ishmael Reed, and Jamaica Kincaid.

The intellectuals of the period were grappling with some major problems. The domination of the Black Arts Movement by Black men was a major concern to the Movement because of the influence it could have upon the role of Black women in the Movement. A major argument was on the choice among Black critics, white critics, or both in analyzing and reviewing Black artistic productions, and also on the choice between Black and white publishers. The intellectuals of the time were trying to find out a way to unite American Blacks with the Black diaspora in order to uplift the entire Black world. An issue continuing over from the previous era to be debated was the issue of continued violence against the Black community.

Throughout American history, Black women have been discriminated against due to racist and sexist attitudes. A Black Feminist Statement by The Combahee River Collective dated April 1977 states: "We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism" (13). They then link Feminism with the Black Movement and, further, with their political stands, paving the way for the emergence of Black feminism: "We realize that the liberation of all oppressed people necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy" (14). No doubt women of The

Combahee River Collective were the first to understand the interrelationship among race, class, and gender. In *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, three Africana women scholars wrote: “Women’s Studies focused almost exclusively upon the lives of white women. Black Studies, which was much too often male-dominated, also ignored Black women Because of white women’s racism and Black men’s sexism, there was no room in either area for a serious consideration of the lives of Black women” (xx). The Black feminism of the 1970s fascinated many Black women who had not approved feminism due to its narrow concerns with white women’s rights: “While many other Black women naively adopted feminism early on, because of the absence of an alternative and suitable framework for their individual needs” (Aldridge 398), many have stood firm against the easy acceptance of it because of the common denominator, feminism. In short, the call for an intersection of race, gender, and class is inevitable, but under the general rubric of feminism it carries all the implications of continued control by white women who created, named, and defined the movement. However, even if a new version of feminism that can simultaneously address sexism, racism, and classism is created, will Black women be able to claim rights and gain an independent voice and identity?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In Black feminist novels, especially in those authored by Black women, we often run into the image of the ‘abnormal’ Black woman. This abnormality usually appears in the form of insanity, irrationality, lesbianism, violent silence, brutality, and violence. In this type of literature, the image of the Black woman is conjured up in the mind of the reader with abnormalities that commonly exceed to the point of castration or genital mutilation, murder even that of a lover, and most shocking of all infanticide. The horrifying picture of the Black woman in African-American literature has caused

many critics to associate her with such mythological figures as Medusa, the Queen Bee, and Eve. There are also critics who have even accused her of having a brain deprived of humanity, a humanity which is often attributed to the whites. In reading the type of literature I am referring to, one wonders whether these abnormalities are real or fake. In other words, could these abnormalities be the construction of a system that aims at containing the Black woman? Are they the effect of an oppressive system with many restrictions and prescriptions upon the Black female body, or are they the Black female's means of self-affirmation in a society that deprives her of identity?, and if the latter case is true, could the Black woman — by deliberately adopting these strategies — threaten the white patriarchal ideology that has branded her as abnormal in order to contain her?

1.3 Objectives and Significance of the Study

1.3.1 Hypothesis

The image of the abnormal Black woman is the construction of the logocentric systematics, in which the white middle class patriarchy has established itself as the center; however, this image can be deconstructed through the denial of a 'logos', allowing the Black woman the possibility of combating the manifold and simultaneous layers of oppression in order to claim voice and identity.

1.3.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of the present study can be viewed from both the literary as well as the social and political perspectives. No doubt Black women writers have always been victim to arbitrary selection due to the partisan judgment not only of white male and female, but also of Black male scholars and critics. In clearer terms, not only have Black women writers been disenfranchised from anthologies and critical works by

white scholars, but they have also been excised from those works by Black male scholars and critics, resulting in their invisibility and namelessness. This study hopes to help Black women explore means by which they can rescue their effaced identity and stifled voice in order to overcome this predicament and, accordingly, succeed in ‘integrating their literature into the mainstream culture’. The value of the research is augmented by our recognition of Black women’s frustration and discontent with the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, a movement which was primarily designed for the freedom of all women, but paradoxically turned out as a site of oppression for Black women. A major cause for this frustration was feminism’s failure to recognize Black women as a category existing at the intersection of race, gender, and class, a point which substantiates the core of the study. Furthermore, since the identity constituents of race, gender, and class have always been used by the dominant class to oppress and marginalize the minority groups on the social and political level, the results of the present research will hopefully contribute Black women and other minority groups to ‘jump outside the restrictions and prescriptions defined by the hegemonic white bourgeois patriarchy’. This latter claim is justified, especially because the tool for conducting this study is deconstruction whose promise of a nonlogocentric world and revolutionary changes can pave the way for the destruction of all repressive constructs traceable back to the Enlightenment, constructs which effect oppression through the double mode and double branding. Along with the destruction of these social constructs comes the deconstruction of the negative image of Black woman as dehumanized Other which is commonly encountered in African-American literature. The deconstruction of this image can in the long run ‘change the readers’ mind set, allowing them to appreciate the true value of African-American literature and, hence, enjoy it’.

1.3.3 Purpose of the Study

The objective of the present research is to study African-American literature, especially from the Harlem Renaissance onward. This study especially intends to delve further into that bulk of African-American literature commonly known as Black feminism. The research is going to be conducted in order to explore how Black women can claim their identity outside of the logocentric world so as to overcome their invisibility. In this regard, the researcher first needs to discover if the Civil Rights and the Feminist Movement are potentially capable of satisfying the needs and desires of Black women in their attempts to overcome different forms of oppression — racial, sexual, and class. In case, the inefficiency of the existing movements is revealed, it is incumbent upon the researcher to find out whether Black women must create new theories and develop a new movement. Thereby, part of the present study is devoted to exploring how Black women, living at the intersection of identity, can seek freedom outside the framework defined by the white patriarchy. This investigation is done through the careful study of some selected novels by African-American women authors whose characters are shown to succeed in this enterprise.

Furthermore, to overcome their voicelessness, the present study intends to reveal how Black women can devise a discourse that would protect them against the repressive reign of the dominant ideology — by allowing them the possibility of voicing their oppression — and, hence, ensure their survival. The same novels are again to be scrutinized to find out how the discourse of Black femininity can provide Black women with their own voice as a way to power.

To be brief, within the scope of the novel, two concepts — identity and discourse — serve as the bedrock in formulating the research questions.

1.3.4 Research Questions

Critical questions concerning ‘identity’ in Black feminist literature to be answered — through a deconstructive lens — include:

1. What is identity? And what are its constituent elements?
2. Is there an inherent relationship between these constituent elements and identity itself?
3. Could these elements be used to oppress some identity groups? If the answer is positive, do these elements operate at the same level?
4. How is Black female identity constructed and deconstructed?
5. Where is Black female identity located in terms of the collective relationship among the constituents of identity?
6. Is Black female identity essentially different from the white male identity? If yes, how can she assert Black female identity?
7. Is there any relationship between claiming Black identity and affecting the power relations as defined by the whites?
8. How did poststructuralism, especially deconstruction affect identity and identity formation?

Questions concerning ‘discourse’ include:

1. Do Black females use a specific kind of language? And is there essentially a monolithic Black female language?