

ABSTRACT

Marginality and Subservience in Selected Works

Ann Petry - The Street

Toni Morrison - Sula

Erna Brodber - Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home

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*A woman is a worthy thyng
They do the washe and do the wrynge
A womane is a worthy wyght
She serveth a man both daye and nyght.*

Medieval English Lyrics ed. R.T. Davies
(London, 1963 No. 174)
(15th Century)

I wish for the purpose of the research paper to suggest that the above quotation, which implies the marginalization of the female, represents both a popular saying encoded in the collective imagination of the 15th century as well as long held views articulated by the elite literary tradition.

The purpose of this research paper, therefore, is to show that historically as well as from a literary perspective, women have strongly opposed this view of themselves. Gina Wisker in her essay "Disremembered and Unaccounted For; Reading Toni Morrison's Beloved and Alice Walker's The Temple of My Familiar" included in Black Women's Writing states that this opposition is expressed by female writers who have "defied

the dominant patriarchal society, by developing a kind of culture and literature based on the use of gender, solidarity and female bonding as self affirming rituals.” (p. 88)

The works of black female writers, according to Wisker, are thus “written against the dominant white male structural and formal norms for literary production, and are products essentially of Black, female folk culture”. (p. 87) Selwyn R. Cudjoe substantiates this claim of marginalization by stating that despite the fact that women on a whole were marginalized, it is the black women who were depicted,

... as existing at the surface level of reality, mere appendages of black male life, never really seeming to live important lives worthy of emulation. They always lived for others, be it for black men or white, black children or aged parents, bereft always, it would seem, of an autonomous self.¹

The three works analyzed, Ann Petry's The Street, Toni Morrison's Sula and Erna Brodber's Jane And Louisa Will Soon Come Home, therefore, reflect varying experiences of marginalization and subservience. Brodber, for example, counters the tradition of patriarchy by being one of the first females to discuss the theme of growing up in a West Indian society, through the consciousness of a female protagonist. I wish to emphasize, however, that what is important, is the discourse offered by each novelist, where the search for autonomy, the definition of self, becomes central to the revolutionising process.