

Controlling the Images of Black Womanhood:

The Contemporary African-American Women's Novel

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Since the times of slavery, the African-American woman has always been the racial and sexual Other in a white supremacist society. The economics of slavery has produced the normative stereotypical mental representations of black women in society as “Jezebel,” “Mammy” and “Sapphire.” “Jezebel” is oversexed and promiscuous; she is the sexual partner of the white master and therefore immoral. As Sally Robinson puts it, “The discursive and social positioning of the black female slave as sexual and ‘immoral’ object becomes a strategy for safeguarding the position of the white male master as exempt from ‘moral’ responsibility” (140). “Mammy” is the asexual maternal slave who takes care of cooking and the white children, while also teaching the black children their assigned place (Collins 78). Being the “merry nigger,” she is not a threat to the white status quo. She is different from the image of “Aunt Jemima” who is only a cook. “Sapphire” is the destructive woman who feels contempt for the black man (Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond* 44).

Controlled by the white patriarchal ideology, these negative images shape black women’s self-definition. The internalization of such images inevitably leads to a negative self-perception, which, as K. Sue Jewell indicates, not only “affect[s] Black male/female relations,” but “[also] extend[s] to the area of cultural conflict among members of the Black community” (“Black Male/Female Conflict” 47). Thus, the inability to share the mode of power appropriated by the white patriarchy forces the black women to redefine their self-images within the intra-cultural network of relationships.

As Emancipation, the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement had attempted earlier, and affected by the latter, African-American women writers, from the 1970s onwards, have been trying to revise the negative images into

positive ones, to “control the image” (Johnson 11; M. Walker 3). Mary Helen Washington contends, “We all know the power that images have to shape and control our lives; we must also begin to realize that we have the power to choose which images we will celebrate. We have myth- and image-makers of our own who have done their job well” (18). In this context, the African-American women’s novel forms an African-American female literary tradition in the process of revising the black female image. The African-American women’s novel presents the resistance of the black women to the denigrated images of black womanhood. This fiction reminds us of Audre Lorde’s warning that “if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (qtd. in Collins 26).

The African-American women’s novel emerged out of the female slave narratives such as Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the life of a Free Black* (1859), and Harriet A. Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). While Wilson’s *Our Nig* is the first African American female prose work, Jacobs’ *Incidents* is the first African-American woman’s text criticizing chattel slavery as the major source of stereotyping. William L. Andrews advances that “the cause of antislavery became an end in itself for the early African-American novel” (vii). Indeed, the African-American women’s novel has utilized slave narratives to recreate the pattern of moving from enslavement to freedom: Selina in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Vyry in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), Ursa in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), and Celie in Alice Walker’s *Color Purple* (1982) attain freedom by coming to terms with their cultural heritage, a process through which they discover the significance of who they really are. There are also novels in which we see black women who lack the power to attain freedom: Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) and Maud in Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953) struggle to live with a dignified stance against the harsh socioeconomic reality.

Yet, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is considered to be the first major African-American feminist novel, setting the literary mode for the contemporaries—a novel in which Hurston traces Janie’s image as a black woman who learns to redefine reality by rejecting the existing images of black womanhood. This article discusses three contemporary novels that are molded in the literary mode set by *Their Eyes*, A. Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992), all three of which have female protagonists who struggle with and attempt to break down the stereotypical images.

Meridian

A. Walker’s *Meridian* deals with the relationship between Meridian Hill’s struggle in the Civil Rights Movement, to change the conditions of black people’s life, and

her own development, as a repressed individual who is “transform[ed] ... through her personal struggle and the Civil Rights work” (Pifer 77). Immersed in racial and gender oppression, her life is pitted over others’ pain: the mummy in her demonstration represents the white woman Marilene O’Shay, murdered by her husband; 13-year-old Wild Child is pregnant and dies, hit by a car; the largest magnolia tree, The Sojourner, was destroyed in a student riot; Mary committed suicide after killing her baby at childbirth. She realizes that desertion and violence mark all women, regardless of color—an observation that leads her to reevaluate her personal life.

Unable to forgive those who failed to warn her against children, Meridian’s pregnancy to Eddie Jr. ends up in her giving him up for adoption. After her divorce from Eddie, she reveals her guilt for not living up to the high standards of black motherhood her mother embodies. She realizes that she is responsible “for shattering her mother’s emerging self” (*Meridian* 51) during her childhood. The feeling that she had been part of her mother’s slavery coincides with her own feelings as a young mother that motherhood is indeed slavery. The fact that her mother made it through pain, and endured, evokes in Meridian the fear of Black Motherhood, “that great institution” (96), her mother embodies. She rejects the roles of wife and mother, because she realizes that “rigid role definitions are static ... they deny human complexity and thereby stifle growth, completeness of being” (McDowell 266). Meridian was taught at an early age by her mother not to trust white men, for they like black women only for sex (Jezebel); and by her grandmother not to trust white women, as the mothers of would-be white oppressors for whom black women are just domestic babysitters, namely the Mammy. She has also experienced sexual harassment by Mr. Raymonds, a married black university professor. She terminates her second pregnancy with an abortion, and has her tubes tied. She has control over her body, as she discards her image as a sexual object in the eyes of men. The moment of realization comes with the President’s refusal to let Wild Child’s coffin into the chapel of Saxon College. Meridian becomes aware that the so-called intellectual climate offers a false definition of humanity. The climate does not even let the Sojourner—the symbol of an activist who worked against black enslavement—to “articulate” the process of freedom. Seeing herself as the branch of the tradition the tree signifies, Meridian sets out for the South. She also gives up her relationship with Truman Held, her fellow Civil Rights Worker. As Alma S. Freeman explains, Meridian has to reject Truman “in an effort to get a hold of her own life” (39). Married to a white Jewish girl, Lynne, Truman goes to work in the South, where Lynne is raped by his black friends—a fact Truman ignores, causing Lynne’s fall into a life of alcohol and prostitution. Lynne is destroyed because her love for Truman has been a form of slavery, leaving no chance of discovering herself, unlike Meridian who breaks through her bondage as wife and mother.

Commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Meridian tells Truman that “revolution would not begin ... with an act of murder ... but with teaching” (188). A

revolution, devoid of educating the mind and the self, is narrowed down to the act of human destruction. Going to the South as a Civil Rights worker, Meridian visits the Black Church in Georgia, where she discerns the real function of the Church as the political and social center of the black people's struggle: "the only place left for black people to congregate, where ... the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously" (199). A black woman of courage, devoting herself to the cause of the Civil Rights Movement, and erasing her personal life for the sake of securing a better life of freedom and equality for the black people, Meridian has attained a sense of wholeness. She creates a sense of community with her people by giving up on any possibility of "ownership" by men, including Truman, even after his divorce from Lynne and the murder of his daughter Camara. Meridian's personal life has shown her that sexism and racism have entrapped black women "in a double encoding system" (Nadel 58). Her struggle for selfhood represents the black woman's resistance against the socioeconomic conditions reinforced by the colonialist representational paradigm. Refusing to be either Jezebel or Mammy, she rejects the image of the "happy slave" (Collins 130-131). She has carved out her own niche by sifting through her cultural heritage within a communal value-system. She reconnects with the black heritage and community in search for an Afrocentric consciousness and a meaningful life "beyond the sexual needs of men" (Byrd 48). Unlike Mem, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Meridian has the courage "to resist society's false definitions" (Christian 118-119) of black women.

The Women of Brewster Place

Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* relates the process by which black women challenge the existing negative definitions, to revalorize themselves through a cooperative act. Walled against the free-flowing traffic of white society, Brewster Place is "a dead-end street" (2), reflecting the lack of change in black women's lives. Their socially prescribed roles are fixated by the society outside, imposing upon them a self-destructive image. In this novel, the lives of seven women are circumscribed by a racist ideology, transposed into the black male violence, as a result of the internalization of the value-system of the white power structure.

Mattie Michael, one of the seven women, is seduced by Butch who leaves her pregnant. She is then severely beaten by her father Samuel, a beating which signifies a permanent state of powerlessness in the family. He beats her cruelly as a way of dealing with his own inability to face his socially crippled manhood in a domain where he cannot erase his daughter's life and image as Jezebel. Frustrated by "her disobedience" (23), he breaks the broom on her "bruised flesh" (24)—a forceful metaphor for her "bruised soul." However, refusing to be dominated by patriarchal values, Mattie departs from Tennessee, to stay temporarily in the North with Etta who soon leaves to pursue her profession as a singer in New York City, and finally gives birth to Basil. The socioeconomic conditions that frame Mattie's

life are embodied in the rat's biting the baby—a memorable scene that shows her lack of power to establish her own life. Knowing that “her choices were few” (29), she takes refuge with Miss Eva Turner who offers her, free of charge, the shelter of the household she shares with her granddaughter Ciel, and who makes sure that Mattie owns her house after she, Miss Eva, dies. Yet, acting out the role of the Mammy, Mattie's overdependence on, and therefore slavery to, her son Basil, who enjoys his power over his mother, gradually shatters her life. Ironically, the fact that Basil, a surrogate-husband as substitute for Butch, depends on her—“a little boy who would always need her” (52)—gives her a sense of security which in the long run proves to be fake: the selfish son strips her of the comfort provided by Eva Turner's legacy—a female-centered space defined by female sharing. When Basil is accused of murder, she pays his bail by selling the house, for Basil “knows that Mama will bail him out of trouble” (Davies 42). So Mattie moves into her apartment in Brewster Place, where “a snowflake ... rolled down her back like a frozen tear” (54)—a metaphor for her emotionally scarred world. Her soul is like her flowers, denied proper growth without the ray of love, for they are walled against any possibility of light: “She pitied them because she refused to pity herself and to think that she, too, would have to die here on this crowded street because there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again” (7).

Mattie's friend Etta Mae Johnson acts out the role of Jezebel and feels as rundown as Mattie—a shared reality that draws them to each other: “She breathed deeply of the freedom she found in Mattie's presence. Here she had no choice but to be herself” (58). She is running away from the violence of the whites in Rock Vale who did not take her “blooming independence” (60) too easily. Her search to build a secure future based on a marriage with Reverend Woods fails. Woods, a filthy seducer who treats her as a Jezebel for one night's sexual satisfaction, owes his self-confidence to his power over people in his religious career: “these worldly women ... understand the temporary weakness of the flesh and don't make it out to be something bigger than it is” (73). His perception of black women as sex objects is juxtaposed with Etta's determined will of never prying into “a broken spirit” (74), emotionally nourished by Mattie. However, neither Etta nor Mattie see through the freedom offered by the rejection of a relational status.

Left out in a disaffectionate world just like Mattie and Etta, Kiswana Browne, a third character, renamed herself with an African name instead of Melanie. Living with her ideals of a better society for African-Americans, Kiswana, the political activist of the sixties, acts as a counterpoise to her mother, who lives a middle-class life in Linden Hills. Rejecting the money and property of her family, Kiswana tries to stand on her two feet, even though she lives on unemployment checks. She would rather stick to “dead-end clerical jobs” than attend the “bourgie schools” (83). In the course of their conversation, her mother proves to be a strong fighter: “But you're going to have to fight within the system ... and get an important job where you can have some influence” (84). Thus, her mother's response entails the survival means for blacks: they have to master the master's tongue to fight their

way through the white power-system. Proud of her grandparents who survived slavery, Kiswana's mother affirms that "black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly—black is!" (86). After she leaves, Kiswana finds the money her mother had left in an envelope, an event implying the importance of the black mother-daughter relationship as a form of sustenance—a source of survival she will later project into Cora Lee's life.

The life of Luciella Louise Turner, a fourth character, is destroyed by her husband, Eugene, who is always out on the run whenever there is a problem. Ciel, as she is called, has already terminated her pregnancy, in order to make him feel that he is capable of providing for the family. However, failing nevertheless to be in full control of financial problems, Eugene projects his anger into Ciel, seeing her role of motherhood as a trap: "Babies and bills, that's all you good for" (94). His decision to leave for a job on the docks turns into an argument ending with a pivotal scene, as it coincides with their daughter Serena's electrocution in the kitchen and eventual death at the hospital. Ciel cries, not for Eugene, but for her dead daughter and her aborted baby. The death and the abortion together represent the sacrifice she has made, "aborting" her womanhood, to perpetuate male power. Her refusal to live is challenged by Mattie's act of washing her up, building a nurturing mother-daughter relationship between them. Mattie's spiritual act of restoring her back to life reinforces Ciel's tears—a nonverbal expression of her pain: "But Mattie knew the tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come" (105).

A fifth character, Cora Lee, who has always received a doll for Christmas, until she herself was able to make "real" babies, is victimized by her parents' patriarchal vision of the woman's role, a role offering her the primacy of her sexual identity. Her habit of "having" babies is reinforced in her relationships with different lovers to the point where she has a houseful of kids. She is fascinated with having babies and feeling the power of her reproductive body as a mother, without realizing that she is always a Jezebel in the eyes of these men. Kiswana's invitation of the whole family to a play, put on stage by her boyfriend Abshu, makes Cora realize that education is pivotal to her kids' future, if they are to serve the African-American community. And, even though she does not give up her life-style with her current lover, she starts having hopes for a different future.

The last two characters, Lorraine and Theresa, have been forced to move from one place to another because of their lesbianism. Lorraine's friendship with the old janitor Ben is based on a father-daughter relationship, and a total disregard of sex. She replaces his daughter, who became the prostitute (Jezebel) of the white boss. He in turn becomes the surrogate father for Lorraine, who was kicked out of her house by her own father at the age of seventeen for being a lesbian. The camaraderie between Ben and Lorraine changes her into a different person: "... she wasn't apologizing for seeing things differently from Theresa" (155). Lorraine's real tragedy is that her self-empowerment is violently shattered by the boys who

gang-rape her. Their aggression is rooted in their repressed manhood, “walled” by the white patriarchal system. Hence, as Celeste Fraser suggests, they “do not rebel against the social forces that built the constricting wall, but rather resort to terror against black women to assert themselves as patriarchs” (Fraser 101). Their action is thus a substitute for the action of the white patriarch, unable as they are to transform their communal power into a constructive act that would provide positive perceptions of the black male self. After the gang-rape is over, the flowering self of Lorraine is replaced by the image of “a wounded animal” (172). Mistaking Ben for one of her rapists, she takes “a loose brick” (172) and kills him, learning through experience that one has to use violence to defend one’s self. Yet the black women of Brewster Place reject Lorraine and refuse to nurture her, because she is the Other. Failing to realize that they identify with the White Master in enslaving her with the image of promiscuity, they behave as the Mammy, never giving her enough personal space to bloom. Much like the male abuse/violence in their pasts through which these women—except Kiswana—have been forced into subjugation to patriarchal authority, they transform it into a “matriarchal authority” against Lorraine.

All these seven women share a past of social denial without any opportunity to redefine themselves beyond gender/racial oppression, for they internalize the negative definitions they fail to modify. Mattie’s attempt for self-fulfillment is rejected by both her father and her lover; Etta is rejected by her lovers; Kiswana has been denied the fulfillment of her political ideals within the white power structure; Ciel is betrayed by her husband; Cora is betrayed by her parents and lovers; Lorraine and Theresa are betrayed by the patriarchal concept of love. The female communion, violated by the male aggression, is transformed into a full communion among the women of Brewster Place in the Block Party, when one of Cora Lee’s children discovers the brick stained with Lorraine’s blood: “And it was passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table, until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue” (186).

The women’s attempt to erase the memory of bloodshed and violence in the act of throwing away the bloody bricks turns into a female ritual. Commemorating Lorraine’s courage of resistance to the “rapist,” the semiotic sign of the wall as oppression is being shaken with these bloody bricks thrown beyond the wall into the street: “Suddenly, the rain exploded around their feet in a fresh downpour, and the cold waters beat on the top of their heads—almost in perfect unison with the beating of their hearts” (188). The rain seems to contain the tears these women have shed over the racist/sexist walls erected around their lives, but it is a rejuvenating occasion to affirm the primacy of the female self to recreate the female culture. Never giving up their “dreams misted on the edge of a yawn” (192), these black women have learned to survive with hopes that transcend the wall which erases their identity from the white social memory through the imposed boundaries of gender and race. Even though the party is conceived in Mattie’s dream for the time being, it still presents “the woman’s communal efforts to

dismantle the restrictive brick wall ...” (Montgomery 31). Hoping to shake the fixed bricks of their subaltern positioning, these women affirm and redefine their self-images in a cooperative act of nurturing each other to redeem an intra-cultural female camaraderie and a communal sense of black womanhood, that Lorraine ushered in their lives. Unlike Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), these women refuse to be destroyed by the Street and all that it represents by an act of “empowerment [that comes] through solidarity” (O’Connor 210).

Jazz

In Morrison’s *Jazz*, we see the impact of dispossession on the black family. Lacking either historical or familial configuration to build up self-images, authentic visions of themselves, both Violet and Joe seek self-empowerment in escape from the burden of an absent history, which, however, being absent, fails to provide them with a true sense of a black self. Joe Trace’s affair with 18-year-old Dorcas ends up in his shooting her—a Jezebel figure to be rid of—when she finds a young lover. Unable to deal with the frustration of displacement in Joe’s inner world, Violet acts out the role of the Sapphire, in trying to shatter the dead face of Dorcas at the funeral, and revenging herself on Joe by finding a lover. The reasons for their mutual destructive impulses lie far beyond the apparent jealousy over Dorcas; they lie rather in a past fragmented by oppression. In fact, out of a need to understand Dorcas’s past, Violet builds a friendly relationship with Dorcas’s aunt, who gives her Dorcas’s picture and tells her life to Violet. From then on, Violet and Joe continuously *look at* Dorcas’s picture above the fireplace and reconstruct the memory of her image. Understanding Dorcas’s identity—who she really was—is also part of the resolution of their childhood conflicts: in reality, what binds Violet, Joe and Dorcas is that they all shared a motherless past.

Failing to develop a self-image, they have turned to different modes of confronting the absent community. Joe’s mother, and later his father, left him at an early age, which makes him obsessed with discovering his mother. With no love for her indifferent father who occasionally comes with money, Violet loses her mother Rose Dear—Jezebel—who “jumped in the well” (99)—an event that gradually filled Violet with a desire to become a mother “out of her fear of repeating her own mother’s suicide” (56). Joe’s belief that children are an inconvenience left her “mother-hunger” (108) unfulfilled. Hence her wish to become a mother, and to become one with her mother, is reduced to the level of daydreaming. Moving from their miserable life in the South within the sharecropping system to a better life in Harlem in the North, they have led a life of unfulfilled dreams without any viable means to connect with their cultural heritage. Similarly, Dorcas also lives with the memories of the day her parents are killed in the fire, caused by a riot, as Dorcas sees the house burn down. The pain of losing her parents is projected into her grief over her dolls, which also burned down with the family. Among these three characters, Dorcas is the only strong one: she was able to resist “her aunt’s

protection” (60), and choose to have an affair with Joe—the father she always yearned for.

Joe, deserted by his mother at an early age; Violet, whose mother Rose Dear committed suicide; and Dorcas, who saw her parents and dolls burn in a fire—all three have to deal with the absence of the past for which they see each other as signifiers. As Violet says, “from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he” (99). Dorcas is also a substitute for Joe’s mother, while Joe represents the lost parents to her. The presence of each character signifies the absence of the past to make it present. None of the characters really exists in the present any more than standing for the lost one. When Dorcas refuses to signify absence but becomes presence itself, not a signifier but an entity, Joe murders her because he cannot bear seeing that both the signifier and the signified evade presence. Dorcas’s real feelings are summed up in her monologue: “Joe didn’t care what kind of woman I was... . I wanted to have a personality, and with Acton I’m getting one” (190).

Violet and Joe have sought refuge in marriage, the social institution in which, ironically, they share an absence of the past rather than the presence of real moments. Since they cannot incorporate their past into a meaningful present, Violet’s desire to fulfill herself as a mother is suppressed within her inarticulate self, as Joe realizes that “This wasn’t Violet’s fault. All of it’s mine. All of it. I’ll never get over what I did to that girl” (129). Dorcas’s desertion of him for Acton represents his mother’s desertion of him, hence he murders his own mother in Dorcas. Violet, who has always wanted to have a daughter to replace her own missing mother, wants to shatter the image of the daughter who destroys her chance to reconnect with the past through her. It is only when Joe kills the mother and Violet punishes the daughter in Dorcas—a complicated act in which she also punishes Joe for being the real cause of her unfulfilled motherhood—that the Trace family start seeing the problematics of their life. Joe gradually realizes that “The past cannot be reclaimed; one present cannot substitute for a lost present; one person cannot stand for another” (57). The family owe their motherless past to the impact of racism and oppression. Both Violet and Joe attempt to determine the meaning of their life by killing off the absence that has long enslaved and pacified them. Dorcas’s murder, and the commotion at the funeral are the acts of confrontation with the implications of the past as a living force in the present.

Left without a solid sense of the past, Violet and Joe do not seem to be strong enough to exist in the present, but constantly escape from it. Being a cosmetics salesman, Joe sells the white standard of beauty—an act that corroborates the Eurocentric concept of beauty as white. Similarly, Violet’s job as a hairdresser also perpetuates the image of the white female beauty: “... the legacy of whiteness as the standard of beauty informs the characters’ views of themselves and each other” (Heinze 35). Disconnected from blackness as a definitive sign of cultural heritage, they have no configuration of black definitional framework, no concept of an authentic black identity. In fact, Violet and Joe fail to understand the meaning of

black identity, as they earn their life by selling the white image. Understanding what it means to be black in white American society can only be attained by *relating* to the black past. They have to re-make or re-discover their past in order to reach a sense of wholeness.

How does one revise the indeterminacy of meaning when one has an absent past that demands to be reclaimed but cannot? Violet learns to give up her obsession with motherhood, and takes her place in Joe's life by learning to be herself. Dorcas had been able to turn her life into that of a conscious choice as opposed to an unconscious escape undertaken by the Trace family: "I'm Acton's and it's Acton I want to please" (191). Dorcas's physical absence gradually leads Joe and Violet to a moment of realization that if childhood problems are resolved by a communal understanding between the two of them, their marriage would mean camaraderie. Once they deal with absence, they come to learn the positive constituents of the black self and develop modes of knowing each other. Violet reconciles with Joe and restores herself to her own self-image, transforming Joe's escape into an act of confrontation. The reintegration with the lost heritage has created a sense of self-empowerment in Violet as a black woman—"Now I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see" (208)—and in Joe as a black man—"He wants to ... hold on to her" (224). They locate their homeless black selves within the cultural memory that literally lifts the "lost history" (Leonard 37) to the level of the present which no longer signifies absence.

The last sentence of the novel obviously challenges us as readers: "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (229). As the monologues of each character turn into a dialogue between Joe and Violet, the narrator wants us to become the members of the community they finally established, because once we finish reading the novel, leaving it as it is would mean having an absent past as well. The text can go on forever, as long as we feel free to "remake its ... meaning" (Eckard 19) in the process of interaction.

Conclusion

A. Walker, Naylor, and Morrison, in *Meridian*, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Jazz* respectively, revise the stereotypical images of black women in American society such as "Jezebel," "Mammy," and "Sapphire" by creating strong female characters. These protagonists can indeed rebuild the negative self-definitions, and control their own self-images as full human beings, rather than as objects, in terms of sex and race. They seem to derive their strength from "the redemptive possibilities of female coalescence" (Awkward 98) in which women's value-system, based on mutual sharing and interdependence, becomes the sole strategy for survival.

By so doing , these African-American women writers appear to have become the new image-makers of black womanhood. Lorde's statement that black women writers should deal not only with "the external manifestations of racism and sexism" but also "with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another" (qtd. in Henderson 121) seems to be the major concern of these authors. It is to be hoped that the positive images they offer will contribute in eradicating the prevalent racist and sexist definitions of black women in the US.

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