

## **Writing the Body of Resistance: Body of Colour and Beyond in Canadian Women's Writing**

**Dr. Kamala Gopalan**

French feminists in large part work within the Freud- Lacan model by reworking some of their tenets, the main one being the famous dictum: Anatomy is Destiny. They interpellate from concepts like 'absence' and 'lack'. Theorists like Luce Irigaray advocate deconstructing all the systems of phallogocentric discourses, including psychoanalysis itself. Likewise, Irigaray sees language as a representational system that needs to be deconstructed as well. French feminists are therefore led to advocate 'writing the body' in order to write authentically and to find their own voice. Women cannot assume the subject position in the Symbolic Order according to them. They recommend a return to the Semiotic or the maternal space to evolve a language of their own. Canadian theorists like France Théoret and Madeleine Gagnon build on ideas of French feminists in terms of exploring language and women's relationship with language.

Linda Hutcheon, the Canadian critic, points out that the critique of totalizing systems and so-called 'universal truths' which is to be found in poststructuralist literary theory is enacted in literature by women writers. Intertextuality and parody, Hutcheon points out are just two of the devices used. An apt illustration would be the domestication and parodying of the male "wilderness" novel by Canadian women writers – Atwood's *Surfacing*, Marian Engel's *Bear*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* - constituting this genre.

Poststructural theory of language, which questions the neat relationship of signifier and signified, and further of the chain of signifiers as also the futility of searching for origins, serves the French feminist agenda well.

The corpus of writing that emanates from the paradigm of 'writing the body' presumably celebrating 'difference' for its own sake and 'jouissance' (in keeping with French feminist theories) has had to confront the most vehement critique from women writers of colour and further from coloured lesbian writers. In the heydays of the French feminist movement, there seemed to be a lacuna in the theories of writing the coloured body precisely from the same quarters. Since then, however, one has witnessed the eruption of the coloured body literally and metaphorically on the literary scene. Most exciting writing and film making seem to have come from the so-called third world writers and artists. It continues to be so to this day. The strongest resistance to the oppressive forces of globalization have come from writers of colour.

This paper seeks to explore the questions raised by this critique of the white mainstream monopoly of "writing the body".

Women of colour is a misnomer, since we come from different races and nations with varied historical experiences. In the Canadian context, the term is used to refer mostly to immigrant writers from Asia and Africa as also native women writers, who of course are different from the former, in their ethos and experiences. The idea of "third world women" is often used by first world feminists as a means of homogenizing vastly differing experiences for convenience than out of ignorance. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes in her influential essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse", "It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of the recent feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named". (174)

In this way it is suggested that theory itself is suspect and cannot be accepted unexamined and uncritically. These words of caution are important for any researcher working on writers of colour to prevent him/her from falling into the trap of trying to dismantle the master's house with his own tools. These views are especially useful when one is working within a theoretical paradigm such as "Writing the Body", which rose partly as a response to white mainstream liberal feminism. Facile applications of this paradigm to the works of coloured women writers, one needs to refrain from. One also needs to guard against the stereotyping and homogenizing of the experiences of women of colour coming from vastly different geographical locations and ethos.

Differences within Difference : There are a number of remarkable differences in the way in which women writers of colour write the body as compared to French feminists, the Quebecoise and white Anglophone writers in Canada.

For one, women writers of colour do not seem to be celebrating the body for its own sake, unlike white mainstream writers, both Anglophone and Francophone. Further, the body often serves as a site to play out their other struggles. The body becomes a metaphor to bring out instances of the triple bind of sex, race and class, unlike white mainstream writers whose critique is merely of the oppressive agencies of patriarchy, language being the foremost one.

Even with reference to language, women writers of colour are triply challenged, in that, they have to stave off not just its patriarchal biases but also those of race and class. Afro-Caribbean women writers in Canada use Demotic or the dialect in their writings to highlight this issue. In other words, there is a more significant agenda than merely celebrating the body that they work from and it is this agenda that they prioritize over the body subtly. This is true of a wide cross section of writers from Kaushalya Bannerji to Dionne Brand, who challenge heterosexuality both through their writings and their lifestyle.

Expressing concern over the metaphorical invasion and misrepresentation of the bodies of Black people, Kadiatu Kanneh, a black critic writes, "Black female identities are not simply figurative or superficial sites of play and metaphor but occupy very real political spaces of diaspora, dispossession and resistance".(348)

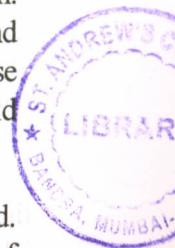
The objections that writers of colour have with regard to the white feminist stand are firstly that they demonstrate complete indifference to the racial problems and other differences to be dealt with. Secondly, they harbor stereotypes about women of colour as a Canadian critic and writer, Himani Bannerji puts it: "They talk about women as an empty category. They will not talk about women as class, about a particular type of woman, about women as race, so it leaves you very empty at the end". (10)

Continuing the same line of argument, Brenda Carr, in her analysis of M. Nourbese Philip's work, questions the psychoanalytic and semiotic based mode of writing the body and further questions the notion of 'jouissance' and asks pertinently, "What of the practical body", "the useful body", "the intelligible body"? "The pained body?" (75) Essentially which body are we talking about seems to be the lingering question. Even the experience of the male gaze is different for women of colour in general and black women in particular.

Critics like Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill propose the notion of multiracial feminism in an attempt to resist monolithic categories like "third world" or "women of colour". They refer to a system of "interlocking inequalities" that govern women's lives. For example, people of the same race will experience race differently depending upon their location in the class structure as working class, professional managerial class, or unemployed; in the gender structure as male or female; and in the structures of sexuality as heterosexual or homosexual, or bisexual. (327)

**Different Critical Tools:** Black critics have expressed a need for different critical tools to be applied to their works. Barbara Smith advocates the need to evolve a different methodology. In her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", she writes that the black feminist critic must begin with "a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and black and female identity are inextricable elements in black women's writing"(163) and asserts that black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition. Canonized writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in the US have struggled long and hard to establish this. Afro Caribbean writers in Canada like Dionne Brand and M. Nourbese Philip have lamented the lack of such a tradition and have felt that their writing would perhaps have been different had it been in the US.

Bell Hooks feels the need to engage mainstream critical theory in order not to get ghettoized. For instance, Hooks looks at the postmodern critique of identity and finds its "critique of essentialism as it pertains to the construction of identity"(26) a significant point. Within the black community, she advocates a plurality of voices and subjectivities. Hooks points out



that race and sex have always been overlapping discourses in the US since slavery. She writes, "Sexuality has always provided gendered metaphors for colonization. Free countries equated with free men, domination with castration, the loss of manhood, and rape – the terrorist act re-enacting the drama of conquest, as men of the dominating group sexually violate the bodies of women who are among the dominated. The intent of this act was to continually remind dominated men of their loss of power, rape was a gesture of symbolic castration." (57) Black intellectuals initially accepted the use of these gendered metaphors unquestioningly and even internalized them, says Hooks. The tendency to see race and class as separate, undermines black resistance and splinters the black community. Language continues to splinter the community with its in-built gender biases centered around the sexual nuances of meaning as Hooks sees it.

**Aesthetics of Difference:** Hooks calls for a rethinking of aesthetics. She acknowledges that in their artistic products as in other aspects of their lives, black artists have had to engage with the dominant discourses. She welcomes plurality within the black community.

**Re-locating on the Margin:** The margin has long ceased to be a space of being "othered" and alienated from the mainstream. The black community has come to view the margin differently. For them the margin as a location, becomes a strategic point from which to speak. It becomes a space from which one perceives reality differently – the outer and the inner both. According to Hooks, the margin becomes a space one chooses to be located at, as a space of resistance. Writers in diaspora like Brand and Philip likewise, challenge mainstream given theories like "writing the body". Audre Lorde advocates the use of 'difference' as a strategic tool from which to create ethnic identities and form communities.

**Simultaneity of Theory and Praxis:** Black writers, as also native women writers in Canada, do not see the false compartmentalization of theory and praxis. They assign a significant role to writing since it is only when women of colour write can their authentic stories be heard, and writing becomes a survival strategy as well. Black writers in Canada evince a keen interest in the issue of language, since it is so inextricably tied to subjectivity and representation. Their works are performative texts which exhibit these concerns in form as well as content. The situation did not change significantly much in the postcolonial world for black women. The masters merely changed their manifestations.

As Brand writes in a poem entitled 'Return', "... bare-footed hot, women worried, still the faces, masked in sweat and sweetness, still the eyes watery, ancient, still the hard, distinct, brittle smell of slavery." (10) Brand, in these lines is trying to capture images of the work worn bodies of slave women. When the poet goes back to her home in the Caribbean, these are the images that crowd her memory associated with the flora and fauna of the island. These are different kinds of dear bodies that require to be written about for herself and for posterity. Poets like Brand and Philip have tried to re/cover through memory their community's erased past to re/store their dignity. In this effort, they find that the body has

a kinetic memory(Philip) which aids this process. Hence, they see a larger agenda that needs to be written about, perhaps using the mode of “writing the body” in subversive ways.

### Works cited

- Bannerji, Himani, Makeda Silvera et al, “We Appear Silent to People Who Are Deaf to What We Say”. *The Issue is ISM: Women of Colour Speak Out, Fireweed's Issue*. No. 16. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1983, 9-29.
- Brand, Dionne. *No Language is Neutral*. Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1990.
- Carr, Brenda. “To Heal the Word Wounded: Agency and the Materiality of Language and Form in M. Nourbese Philip’s *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*.” *Studies in Canadian Literature*. Vol. 19:1 (1994): 72-93.
- Christian, Barbara. “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn Warhol and Diane P. Herndl. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black*, Boston: South End Press, 1989
- Hutcheon, Linda. “Shape-Shifters: Canadian Women Novelists and the Challenge to Tradition”. *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, Edmonton: Longspoon/Newest. 1986. 219-27.
- Kanneh, Kadiatu. “Feminism and the Colonial Body”. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 346-48.
- Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House: Comments at the Personal and the Political.” *This Bridge Called My Back*. 98-101. (Second Sex Conference, Oct.29,1979).
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia. London: Routledge, 1996. 172-97.
- Philip, Nourbese Marlene. “Writing a memory of losing that place” (An interview with M.Nourbese Philip). *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, 226-44.
- Zinn, Maxine Baca and Dill Bonnie Thornton. “Theorizing Difference: From Multiracial Feminism”. *Feminist Studies*. Vol.22, No. 2 (Spring 1996):321-31.