

(2) African American Woman Writers and Womanism

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall

Womanism

- Features
- an African-American form of feminism defined by **Alice Walker** in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1987)
 - a black feminism that 'appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's flexibility and women's strength'
 - a form not narrowly exclusive but 'committed to survival and **wholeness** of entire people, male and female'
 - the original definition of womanism appeared in the preface of Alice Walker's book and included four parts
- Four-Part Definition
- the term derives from the adjective '**womanish**' as opposed to 'girlish', meaning acting grown up but in way that is wilful, courageous, audacious, even outrageous, but not in the negative sense
 - the womanists **love other women**, sexually or non-sexually, and struggle to free their people from oppression
 - the womanists love music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the folk and themselves
 - the relation of womanism to feminism is similar as the relation of the colour purple to lavender

Toni Morrison (b. 1931)

- Writing
- emphasizes 'not the difference between fact and fiction but the distinction between fact and truth' because the latter cannot exist without human intelligence, whereas the former can exist independently from human beings
 - seeks 'to have the reader work *with* the writer in the construction of the book' and in her novels often uses a number of various narrative devices to implement that goal
 - brings forward those exiled to the margins for their race or gender to name themselves and narrate their history
 - emphasizes the centrality of the African American experience, in particular that of an African American female
 - focuses on the psychosocial consequences of racism, on the mind-forged manacles of **internalized racism**
- History
- her work can be seen as an attempt to write several concentric histories of the American experience from a distinctively African American perspective in order to move away from the dominant context of white history
 - focuses on 'silence and evasion', the shadows and absences, the gaps and **omissions in American history**
 - draws 'the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States' from the margins of the imagination to the centre of American literature and history
 - argues that what is distinctive about the history of the country is 'its claim to freedom' as well as 'the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment'
 - claims that 'Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness' from its origins until the present

The Bluest Eye (1970)

- Internalized Racism
- her first novel, whose narrator, Claudia McTeer, tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a little black girl whose overwhelming **hunger for love** is manifested in a desire for blue eyes which eventually drives her to insanity
 - deconstructs the image of the white community as the site of normality and perfection and exposes the realities of life in an impoverished African American community
 - opens with a parodic passage from a Dick and Jane school primer presenting an ideal, inevitably white family
 - Pecola is driven inward by the norms of white society to shame and the destruction and division of the self
 - Claudia is directed outward to anger against white society, focusing her anger on destroying her white dolls

Sula (1973)

- Female Relationships
- her second novel shows how a black community evolves and shapes itself within its own cultural resources
 - opens up the area of intimate friendship between African American women through the two main characters
 - charts the diverse paths and possibilities available to females as part of or apart from **communal tradition**

Song of Solomon (1977)

- Present Through Past
- her third novel follows the growth of a distinctive black identity and community through the habit of language
 - tells the story of a young man, Milkman Dead, who comes to know himself through a return to his origins
 - consists of a complex tapestry of memory and myth in the **slave legends** surrounding the protagonist's family
 - teaches the protagonist through the stories of men who flew to freedom and women who remained to foster
 - takes the protagonist back to the history and makes him discover through the past how to live in the present

Assimilation v. Separation Tar Baby (1981)

- further pursues the themes of ancestry and identity, primarily through the contrast between two characters
- Jadine Childs, a model, has been brought up with the help of white patrons and **assimilated** into white culture
- William Son Green, an outcast and wanderer, remains outside the white culture and in deliberate **resistance**
- the characters are drawn to each other and try to rescue the other, from assimilation and separation respectively
- their love affair is eventually aborted, and neither of them changes fundamentally, leaving the conclusion open

Loose
Trilogy***Beloved*** (1987)¹

- her masterpiece so far takes as the core an actual story of the fugitive slave Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter and then tried to kill her other children and herself rather than be returned back to slavery (1856)
- describes the story of Sethe Suggs, who killed her young daughter, Beloved, when faced with the same threat
- discloses the characters struggling with a past that cannot yet must be remembered, cannot yet must be named
- pivots around the main contradiction of black history, the **need to remember** and tell and the **desire to forget**
- the mother and daughter relationship as presented both denies the institution of slavery and measures its power
- the novel mixes narrative genres, contains elements of realism, the Gothic and African American folklore, weaves its way between the vernacular and a charged lyricism, the material and the magical
- forces the reader to collaborate with the author, narrator and characters in the construction of meaning, making the whole aim of both the story and its protagonist **to name the unnameable**

Jazz (1992)

- inspired by funeral photographs in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* that the author edited, set in Harlem in 1920s
- tells about a young woman who, as she lies dying, refuses to identify her lover as the person who has shot her
- imitates the improvisational **jazz techniques** by presenting history as a process of constant telling and retelling
- employs a narrator who constantly revisits and revises events and frankly confesses her own fallibility

Paradise (1998)

- set in 1976, the bicentennial of American democracy, but circles as far back as to the mid-eighteenth century
- describes the intimate contact between two communities, one a black township, the other a refuge for woman
- presents as the pivotal act the shooting and apparent killing of the women at the refuge by men from the town
- closes with the unresolved puzzle of the marvellous disappearance of all the bodies and reappearance of some

Alice Walker (b. 1944)

- Womanism
- her reputation rests on her novels, but has also written poetry, short stories, essays and children's books
 - all her work in all genres is devoted to what she calls womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1987)
 - her fiction focuses on the evolution of female wholeness, the development of female identity and community
 - her non-fiction celebrates her **connection with other African American women**, particularly woman writers
 - helped to promote the work of African American women by co-founding the publishing outlet Wild Tree Press
 - also edited a seminal selection of the prose of Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing* (1979)

Non-fiction ***In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*** (1987)

- at once a memoir and a series of observations on African American women's culture, especially literature
- establishes a specifically womanist tradition helping to show the pivotal importance of works by black women
- sets up a series of role models from the silent and unheralded, as mothers whose gardens or hand-crafted quilts are their own way of art, to the writer who has been the 'queen bee' for the author, that is **Zora Neale Hurston**

Novels ***The Third Life of Grange Copeland*** (1970)

- a realistic first novel describing three generations of a family marred by racial oppression and sexual violence
- a stark account of a repetitive cycle of abuse, wife beating and sexual exploitation in the history of the family

Church & Mother ***Meridian*** (1976)

- concentrates on the civil rights movement and fight for social change, but centres on the experience of women
- the eponymous protagonist lives in the North but returns to the South to help in a voter registration drive
- feels held back by her past, her mother and a church that is both her mother's church and her mother church
- feels guilt over abandoning her own child, betraying 'maternal history' and involving herself in politics

- Whole Woman
- fails to come to personal terms with her **mother** but succeeds in experiencing a symbolic rapprochement when she whispers to the figure of her mother she sees in a dream that she loves her but also begs her to let her go
 - manages to come to terms with the **church**, because the church she encounters in the South is one transformed by the civil rights revolution which offers a new and promising form of personal and socio-political revolution
 - finally comes back to her own history only in order to transcend it and successfully become a **whole woman**

Masterpiece ***The Color Purple*** (1982)

- follows a purely secular salvation involving the discovery of identity and community by the protagonist Celie
- shows Celie as a victim of racial and sexual oppression, raped by her father and abused in a loveless marriage
- makes Celie learn how to grow into being and companionship through the example of three women mentors

- Mentors
- her first mentor, Sofia, teaches her by her own example the lesson of **resistance** to white and male oppression

¹ The last three novels form a loosely connected trilogy about 'various kinds of love', that is, respectively, the love of a mother for her child, romantic love and 'the love of God and love for fellow human beings'.

- her sister Nettie, a missionary working in Africa, discloses the proud **inheritance** of the ancient black cultural and spiritual tradition and links the story of racial oppression in America to a larger history of imperial conquest
 - her last mentor, the blues singer Shug Avery, offers the possibility of sexual **pleasure** and unpacks the specific cultural forms shared by African Americans, both the sensual promise of jazz and the tragic melancholy of blues
 - Shug asserts that **everything is holy**, worthy of respect and wonder, even the colour purple, even Celia herself
- Letters
- relates the process of becoming herself with learning a language, Celia learns to act by learning how to say it
 - takes on the form of an **epistolary** novel which shows Celia developing a language as a medium of selfhood
 - moves from letters to 'God' to letters sent to Celia's sister and by implication to all her sisters, all the readers
 - the novel figures as the author's seminal work, her later novels develop its themes and revisit its characters

Later
Novels

***The Temple of My Familiar* (1989)**

- explores a variety of subjects from a womanist perspective, features Shug Avery and Celia's granddaughter
- resembles a collection of loosely related tales, a sermon, a stream of dreams and memoirs rather than a novel
- connected by the belief that 'all daily stories are in fact ancient and ancient ones current', there is nothing new

***Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992)**

- develops the issue of female circumcision as a symptom of male cultural violence

***By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998)**

- explores the thin and permeable boundaries between different ethnic traditions and between life and death

Gloria Naylor (b. 1950)

Novels

- shares with Toni Morrison and William Faulkner an interest in the determining impact of setting as well as the intention of creating her own **fictional map** in her novels

Female
Victims

***The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)**

- her first novel is a series of interrelated tales of seven African American women in a dead-end street of a ghetto
- the women suffer from insensitivity and violence at the hands of men from their own families and community

Virgil
& Dante

***Linden Hills* (1985)**

- her second novel, set in the 1980s in a middle-class community, traces the journey of a young African American poet accompanied by a fellow poet through an exclusive black neighbourhood in search for odd jobs
- suggests a resemblance of the two characters to Virgil and Dante and of Linden Hills to the Dantean Inferno
- creates a setting that seems to be inhabited by the **lost souls** of those who have sold out to the dream of success

Magical

***Mama Day* (1988)**

- superimposes two Willow Springs, an island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, and New York City
- allows the consciousness of the island to narrate some parts, dramatizes exchanges of the living and the dead
- aims to analyse the **nature of belief** by inviting the reader to participate in that willing suspension of disbelief that magic, religion and fiction all share

Mythical

***Bailey's Cafe* (1992)**

- the novel is written in the form of a **jazz suite**, but also combines the grimly material and the strangely mythic
- centres the action on the eponymous New York City restaurant and all-night café as a way station of lost souls

Male
Aggressors

***The Men of Brewster Place* (1998)**

- returns to the men whose violence and indifference made the lives of the women of her first novel miserable
- continues to map out the mundane facts, the magical dreams and monstrous nightmares belonging to one place

Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995)

Work
& Views

- a short-story writer, novelist and scriptwriter², a noted civil rights activist during the 1960s
- writes in close alignment with her political convictions, calls herself '**Pan-Africanist-socialist-feminist**'
- realizes that African American women suffer from the double jeopardy of racism and sexism
- suggests as a remedy for African American women to start 'turning toward each other'
- turned to her own ancestors and added her grandmother's name, Bambara, to her own

Editions

***The Black Woman* (1970), *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971)**

- seminal anthologies of short stories and essays which she edited

Stories

***Gorilla, My Love* (1972), *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977)**

- collections of short stories about a young African American woman who is trying to survive in the city

² Among others author of the screenplay for the film based on Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* (1981).

- distinguished by the acuteness of their socio-cultural observations and their energetically colloquial idioms
- the protagonist's **sassy straight talk** expresses 'a certain way of being in the world'
- the words catch the rhythms of African American folk speech and the 'games, chants, jingles' of the streets
- the language speaks the protagonist's resistance, affirmation of herself and her relation to other black women

Novels

The Salt Eaters (1980)

- a novel reflecting the profound changes of mood in the United States after the Vietnam War

Those Bones Are Not My Child (1999)

- a novel about the disappearance and murder of forty black children in Atlanta, Georgia, within three years
- edited by **Toni Morrison**, who regarded it as the author's masterpiece, and published posthumously

Paule Marshall³ (b. 1929)

Barbados

- born in Brooklyn as the daughter of second-generation immigrants from Barbados, a West Indian island-nation
- grew up with the tales of her mother and her female **Barbadian** friends called by her the 'poets in the kitchen'
- approaches the experiences of black women from a different perspective due to her West Indian background

Fiction
Firsts***Brown Girl, Brownstones*** (1959)

- her first novel features as the protagonist Selina Boyce, the daughter of first-generation Barbadian immigrants
- one of the first novels since Claude McKay to explore the link between African Americans and West Indians
- one of the first to explore the inner life of a young black girl and the black **mother and daughter** relationship
- set in the brownstone buildings of **Brooklyn** in 1939 when white dwellers are being replaced by West Indians
- shows the protagonist torn between the kitchen talk of her mother and her friends and the reveries of her father
- her mother, a powerful overwhelming figure, longs to assimilate, buy house and buy into the American dream
- her father, a feckless romantic whom she adores, dreams of returning to Barbados in his upstairs sun room
- the protagonist struggles with her equivocal feelings about her mother and father and her polyglot inheritance
- decides to leave for Barbados, not to imitate her father's dream but to retrace her mother's diasporic wandering
- accepts the burden of finding all the cultural fragments needed for her American and Barbadian self-definition

Diaspora

Novellas

Soul Clap Hands and Sing (1961)

- a collection of four novellas, further developing the idea of the wandering quest undertaken in her first novel

Later
Novels***The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*** (1969), ***Praisesong for the Widow*** (1987), ***Daughters*** (1991)

- her later novels, dramatizing a search for and reconciliation of the self with an African diasporic historical past, often involving a **reverse Middle Passage**

³ Not to be confused with Paula Marshall, an American actress.