CLAIMING B(L)ACK MANHOOD, CLAIMING SOULS:

MALE PORTRAITURE IN NOVELS

BY

ALICE WALKER, TONI MORRISON, AND GLORIA NAYLOR

- - - A WOMANIST READING - - -

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Weihua Zhang

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

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for my husband Qiwei and daughter Feifei

and

in memory of my mother

Title: Claiming B(l)ack Manhood, Claiming Souls: Male Portraiture in Novels by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor – a Womanist Reading –

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This study is an examination of the black male portraiture in Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (1977), and Gloria Naylor's Mama Day (1988). Since the 1970s, among many of the controversies surrounding the writings of black women, one is on the reading of the black male portraiture: while female readers tend to see an implicit affirmation of black women, males tend to see a programmatic assault on black men. This study is an attempt to offer an alternative reading of the complexity of black male images in the three works by Walker, Morrison, and Naylor.

The critical approach is informed by Afroncentric womanism articulated by Alice Walker, Sherley Anne Williams, Michael Awkward, and Hortense Spillers. In her essay "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," Williams embraces Walker's term "womanist" and explicates it as a commitment "to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, female *and* male, as well as a valorization of women's works in all their varieties and multitudes"; while Awkward contends that Afrocentric womanism requires "a recognition on the part of both black females and males of the nature of

the gendered inequities that have marked our past and present, and a resolute commitment to work for change."

This study argues that Walker, Morrison, and Naylor, rather than simply portray their male characters as abusers, murderers, sadists, rapists, hyperpotent, good-for-nothing (the list can go on and on), which has traditionally been the outcome of much of the Eurocentric social science research and media presentation exploring the experience of black men, they are positioned to respond to that outcome by focusing on an alternative reading of black masculinity – a reading that is deeply grounded both in the social and historical realities of black people and in the womanist commitment to the survival and wholeness of black people.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Since the 1970s, with the increasing literary and commercial success of black women writers, *what* black women write about and *how* they get their messages across are topics that have been heatedly debated. Among many of the controversies is the reading of black male portraiture in black women's writings. Deeply divided by two polarized ideas, this controversial debate has tended to split (though not neatly) along gender lines: female readers tend to see an implicit affirmation of black women, while males tend to see a programmatic assault on black men (McDowell 75-76). Neither side of this polarized reading, though, has been inclusive and insightful enough to grasp the complexity of black male portraiture in black women's writings. Hence, critics have been looking for alternative perspectives that will shed light on our readings.

Focusing on a close textual reading of Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (1977), and Gloria Naylor's Mama Day (1988), this study argues that Walker, Morrison, and Naylor create balanced and complex black male characters via a womanist perspective that is deeply rooted in the African ontology and tradition. The need for an alternative reading that is informed by a womanist perspective -- a reading that will take into consideration the complex and lived experience of the male characters in their works has been articulated by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor on different occasions. According to Walker, a womanist is a "black feminist or feminist of color" who is committed to the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Gardens xi, italics original). Walker sees no separation of genders in African American women's writings, but a determination to

tell the truth and to believe in the soul. In the Afterword to The Third Life of Grange Copeland written in 1987, Walker declares:

> An inevitable daughter of the people who raised and guided me, in whom I perceived the best as well as the worst, I believe wholeheartedly in the necessity of keeping inviolable the one interior space that is given to all. I believe in the soul. Furthermore, I believe it is prompt accountability for one's choices, a willing acceptance of responsibility for one's thoughts, behavior and actions, that makes it powerful. The white man's oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tree, because the self that I prize refuses to be owned by him. Or by anyone. (345)

Walker's womanist concern has enabled her to depict her male characters with more compassion and understanding. Here, Walker has summed up what she thinks is essential for one to claim Selfhood: one's liberation and freedom should not depend on one's oppression of others; one is held responsible for one's actions. Her declaration will serve as a framework for me to analyze her male characters in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, and in the respective novels by Morrison and Naylor.

Morrison, when asked what she thinks of the necessity to develop a specific black feminist model of critical inquiry, cautions that ". . . there is more danger in it than fruit, because any model of criticism or evaluation that excludes males from it is as hampered as any model of criticism of Black literature that excludes women from it" ("Rootedness" 344). Like Walker, Morrison is not interested in an incomplete representation of her male characters, or of any of her characters. Naylor, in a conversation with Morrison, expressed her concern with the male images in her works: ". . . there was something that I was very self-conscious about with my first novel [The Women of Brewster Place, 1982]; I bent over backwards not to have a negative message come through about the men. . . . But I worried about whether or not the problems that were being caused by the men in the women's lives would be interpreted as some bitter statement I had to make about black men" (Naylor and Morrison 579).

Responding to the criticism on Eugene's failure – a young black father in the story "Luciella Louise Turner" of Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place – to be at his daughter's funeral that paints Eugene as an unfeeling person, Naylor went on to say that she wanted her reader to see that Eugene did care about the death of his child and its impact on the mother, "but he had been so beaten down he couldn't come through for his family." She confessed to Morrison that she had the pull – to "want there to be no doubt about the *goodness* of these male characters" – and got this affirmation from Morrison: "You should have that pull. You should wonder. Am I doing them justice? Is anybody going to misread this?" (Naylor and Morrison 580, italics original). Clearly, in their own words and discussions, one senses the concern in Walker, Morrison, and Naylor about being misread and misunderstood. They are, hence, reserved in endorsing any perspective that will compromise their messages.

A womanist perspective can help eliminate misreadings of the male characters portrayed by Walker, Morrison, and Naylor. The male characters in their novels are not subject to degradation, programmatic assault, or male-bashing. Rather, they are confronted with situations where their very notion of manhood is challenged and redefined. In the process of reclaiming their manhood, some characters fail while others succeed – though not without a soul-wrenching struggle. The manhood they reclaim is tied to their blackness. That is to say, they are not looking up to white standards to measure their manhood. Here, material success is not the measure, nor is macho men who suppress their feelings. This reclaimed black manhood is not based on black men's violence against and domination over their women and children but on the acknowledgment of the pain they have inflicted on their loved ones and on each other. In their struggle for manhood and Selfhood, those black male characters have put on a touching display of humanity and a willing embrace of their souls. They have

demonstrated to us that to be human is to make mistakes; but what is more, to be human is to learn from one's mistakes, one's past, history, and culture. One's humanity is closely linked to one's possessing a soul.

In fact, Morrison herself has demonstrated the usefulness of the womanist approach when she analyzes some of her own characters. In an interview with Robert Stepto on May 19, 1976, while she was working on her third novel which later was published as Song of Solomon, Morrison talked about some male characters in her first two novels The Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973). This conversation can really shed light on our understanding of her overall concerns with her characters and her portrayals of men in particular. First, Morrison discussed Ajax's relationship with Sula in Sula:

> . . . the one man who talked to her, and thought she was worthy of conversation, and who let her be, was the one man she could relate to on that level that would make her want something she had never been interested in before, which was a permanent relationship. He was a man who was not intimidated by her; he was interested in her. He treated her as a whole person, not as an extension of himself, not as a vessel, not as a symbol. . . . He was secure enough and free enough and bright enough--he wasn't terrorized by her because she was odd. . . . When a man is whole himself, when he's touched the borders of his own life, and he's not proving something to somebody else--white men or other men and so on--then the threats of emasculation, the threats of castration, the threats of somebody taking over disappear. (Stepto 220)

Two things, at least, stand out in this comment: that the relationship between black men and black women should be based on mutual respect and interdependence; that the definition of black masculinity is explicated as a man who is "whole" inside himself and who does not have to prove anything to anybody. Both are essential to my analysis of the male characters in Morrison's Song of Solomon and the other two novels under this study.

In the same interview, Morrison compares Cholly Breedlove in The Bluest Eye with Ajax:

> [Cholly is like Ajax] . . . they sort of – through neglect of the fact that someone was not there–made up themselves. They allowed themselves to be whomever they were. Cholly . . . is the thing I keep calling a 'free man,' not free in the legal sense, but free in his head. . . . This is a man who is stretching . . . he's going all the way within his own mind and within whatever his outline might be. Now that's the tremendous possibility for masculinity among black men. And you see it a lot. Sometimes you see it when they do art things, sometimes just in personality and so on. And it's very, very deep and very, very complex and such men as that are not very busy. They may end up in sort of twentieth-century, contemporary terms being also unemployed. They may be in prison. They may be doing all sorts of things. But they are adventuresome in that regard. (Stepto 220-21)

Though Morrison does not mention it here, we know from reading the novel that Cholly's freedom is highly problematic and brings severe consequences to other characters in the novel, especially to those who are less free and adventuresome. One example is Cholly's rape of his own young daughter Pecola. Whether we read this as Cholly's helpless gesture to show Pecola tenderness or his violation of her body, the striking incongruity is there: on the one hand, we are aware of Cholly's freedom to do things within his own mind and within the social limitations; on the other hand, we are aware of the tragic consequence suffered by Pecola. And there is simply no reconciliation of the two.

In their works, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor are either responding to the prevailing male-centered, Eurocentric masculinist discourse that preaches, among many things, a patriarchal ideology that places the male/father/husband as the center and decision-maker of the family and male/female relationships, the husband/father as the sole or main provider and protector; or are offering a critique of androcentric black masculinist discourse that equates black subject to black males, an androcentric ideology that requires the black female's subordination to her man and withdrawal from the public, that sees the black female as the soul supporter and nurturer of black man and black race. But these two discourses are not entirely separate: both privilege masculinity; both set out

a very specific (read subordinate) position for women; and both rely on a complex of behaviors that can be read as "masculine" whether you are black or white. These three writers have demonstrated in their works the hazardous and detrimental effects of both discourses on black males and females. They are hazardous and detrimental because while the male-centered, Eurocentric discourse operates on the denial and/or erasure of the self-identity of black people as a whole and black men in particular, the androcentric black masculinist discourse speaks "endlessly of the dehumanization and castration of the Afro-American male by white men and black women" and seems "simplistic and unself-consciously concerned with justifying domestic violence and other forms of black male brutality" (Awkward 53).

The womanist perspective articulated by Walker is shared by the following theorists/critics: Sherley Anne Williams, Michael Awkward, bell hooks, and Hortense Spillers. In her essay "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," Williams argues for a womanist commitment to a "valorization of women's works in all their varieties and multitudes" (70) – an imperative when we analyze male portraitures depicted by the three writers under this study. The three works under this study vary greatly in writing styles and fictional locations. For example, Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a realistic portrayal of the Copeland family in the South during the first six decades of the twentieth century; while Morrison's Song of Solomon and Naylor's Mama Day are magical realism and contain highly magical/mythical elements, both with a time span of at least two centuries.

Michael Awkward, defining himself as a black male feminist, provides another dimension to the afrocentric womanism, what he terms as "Black womanism": Afrocentric womanism requires "a recognition on the part of both black females and males of the nature of the gendered inequities that have marked our past and present, and

a resolute commitment to work for change" (52). Awkward's call for a commitment to work for change is answered by the three women writers in their respective works. To implement change, these writers have provided their male characters with occasions for confrontations -- be it through an act of self-denial and self-discovery (Grange's denial of the whites' definition of manhood through his act of claiming personal accountability; Milkman's discovery of his family name and family history; and George's denial of the teaching of the white institution through his negotiation with Ophelia for a meaningful relationship based on mutual respect and interdependence); or through an acknowledgment of the pain black males have inflicted on black females (Grange's awareness of his share in the death of his wife Margaret; Milkman's reflective contemplation upon Solomon's deserting of Ryna, his father's virtual abandonment of his mother, and his subsequent abandonment of Hagar; and George's symbolic gesture of crossing over the bridge and entering Willow Springs into Ophelia's world, thus acknowledging her pain of not being trusted and loved enough). All three writers seem to say that the first step to address the historical wrongs to black people, males and females, is to understand the intimate relationships between the sexes and across generations, for existence-in-relationship informs the life and reality of African Americans in the American society.

In her provocative essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," black womanist Hortense Spillers formulates new, potentially nonpatriarchal figurations of family and of black males' relationship to the females: "the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself. . . . It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood" (80, italics original). Having examined slavery's debilitating effects on the Afro-American family's

constitution, Spillers envisions a redefinition of black masculinity as a movement toward successful resolution which seems to require a serious engagement with womanist principles and perspectives. In one way or another, all three writers have born witness to Spillers' figuration in their works. Acknowledging the fact that throughout history, black males have participated voluntarily and/or involuntarily in the oppression of black females is the first necessary step for the black community to heal. To ensure the survival of the black community, the black male must learn to regain the heritage of the mother: the mother's pain and hope for a better life. For while the pain is never the mother's alone -- the hope for a better life is for all black people. Walker, Morrison, and Naylor in this study have demonstrated their efforts to foster a conversation between the males and females -- a link that is necessary to bring about changes in the troubled black male and female relationships. This fits in very well with the womanist concern of these three women writers.

It is very important to recognize the African ontology and tradition in the womanist perspective held by Walker, Morrison, and Naylor when we study their representations of the male characters. According to Innocent Onyewuenyi, the Nigerian scholar, the differences between the metaphysics of Western philosophy and African philosophical thought lie in the fact that the former is based on a static conception of being; the latter, a dynamic conception of being: "Existence-in-relation sums up the African conception of life and reality" (524). De Lancey explicates the term Afrocentric womanism thus: "The concept of separate beings, of substance which exist side by side, independent of one another, is foreign to African thought. Hence, the term of Afrocentric womanism, characterized by principles of multi-dimensionality, existence-in-relationship, balance, and dynamism, offers an analytical framework for theorizing about the experiences of African American women" (16). And I think we can justifiably extend

this framework to include the experiences of African American men and the fictional male characters under this study.

It is not difficult to detect the humanistic core at the heart of a womanist perspective. As Dona Richards has pointed out so clearly:

> African-American humanism is derived from the humanistic nature of the African world view, and grows out of the African conception of the human being. It is an attitude toward life which stresses the importance of spiritual/ emotional experience. Man's [and woman's] ability to have power over and to exploit others is not paramount. Rather, human interrelationship and interdependency are recognized as primary needs and part of what validates human experience. (229)

When examined under such a light, we can see why all three writers are very critical of their male characters' patriarchal behavior inside their families and among interpersonal relationships. As African American writers who are interested in the well-being of their communities and the entire human race, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor advocate mutual respect, interdependence, and unity among her characters.

Walker, Morrison, and Naylor have testified to their womanist commitment in yet another way -- that is, they have depicted a wide range of female characters who are as complex and balanced as the males, and who challenge the stereotypical images of women. In these three novels, we are shown that females are not necessarily nurturers at all times. Such examples are abundant: in Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland, we see no bonding between Josie and her niece and ward Mem; we are disturbed by the jealousy and lack of communication between Josie and her step-grandchild Ruth. In Song of Solomon, we realize the threat of Milkman's mother, Ruth Foster Dead, to his well-being. In Mama Day, we are told that oftentimes, it is the females in the Day family that have been heartbreakers. When read together with the nurturing and caring males in the

books, such as Grange's caring of Ruth, Jake's of Pilate, and John-Paul's of Mama Day, we are made more aware of these writers' womanist commitment.

In an attempt to respond to the androcentric discourse and definition of black masculinity, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor have tried to (re)define black manhood in their three respective novels through the Afrocentric womanism. In this study, I privilege the term "womanist" because I share Sherley Anne Williams' concern that current black feminist criticism tends to argue for separation; it has a "tendency to see not only a *distinct* black female culture but to see that culture as a separate cultural form having more in common with white female experience than with the facticity of Afro-American life" (70, italics original).[1] As will be made clear in my detailed analysis of the books, this dual focus of afrocentric womanism -- its emphasis on the well-being of both female and male and its awareness of the diversity and difference in women's works -- proves crucial to an alternative reading of the black male portraiture in black women's writings.

In the novels studied here, there is a unifying thematic concern for Walker, Morrison, and Naylor to see their male characters claiming their manhood and their souls. This study, in its application of a womanist perspective, takes a close look at the male characters portrayed by Walker, Morrison, and Naylor. What Morrison has said about her own work can be extended to include that of Walker and Naylor: "My work bears witness and suggests who survived and under what circumstances and why" (LeClair 371). In the following three chapters, we are going to see how the work of Walker, Morrison, and Naylor has born witness to the struggles and experiences of black men; how the three writers have situated their male characters in the cultural and sociohistorical settings which largely affect their development; and how these characters have faced the challenge of claiming b(l)ack manhood and claiming souls.