

Domestic Abuse *in the Novels of African American Women*

A CRITICAL STUDY



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Domestic Abuse
in the Novels of
African American Women
A Critical Study

HEATHER DUERRE HUMANN

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Domestic Abuse
in the Novels of
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I dedicate this book
to my wonderful children,
Ashley and James!

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Introduction: *What's Love Got to Do with It?*

What do the 1993 film *What's Love Got to Do with It?*, Nikki Giovanni's poem "Woman," Ntozake Shange's poem "With No Immediate Cause," and musician Chris Brown's 2009 arrest for felony battery have in common? All are concerned with the problem of intraracial (within the same race) gender-based violence in the African American community. Domestic abuse has long been a hidden problem—and this is especially true in the African American community—but many black female artists, poets, and singers, have, over the past several decades, begun to weigh in on the issue of domestic abuse against black women and tried to map a better way. The high visibility of the Chris Brown case and the popularity of the Tina Turner film biopic open up a forum for public discussion and awareness of the issue of domestic abuse, but many African American female novelists have also been raising awareness about abused women through their literary works. Like films such as *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (which chronicles Tina and Ike Turner's abusive relationship) and the many songs and poems that confront the issue, much of the fiction written by African American female novelists sheds light on the complex—and once taboo—subject of domestic violence. These novels raise awareness about domestic violence by giving voice to the experiences of abused women and they also illustrate the myriad forces that conspire to keep hidden the problem of domestic abuse.

The aims of *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women* are threefold: to examine how African American female novelists portray domestic abuse and thus raise awareness about the complex problem, to outline how literary depictions of domestic violence are responsive to a variety of cultural and historical forces, and, finally, to explore the literary tradition of novels that deal with domestic abuse within the African Amer-

ican community—a tradition that was begun by Zora Neale Hurston in the 1930s and has since flourished and taken different forms, thanks to the diverse body of fiction created by more contemporary African American women writers. The literary works discussed in this book all reflect, question, and ultimately contribute to the ways in which contemporary American society shapes attitudes about, and responds to, the myriad problems related to domestic abuse. *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women* considers a diverse assortment of literary works: Zora Neale Hurston's literary masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Gayl Jones' blues novel, *Corregidora* (1975); Alice Walker's powerful epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* (1982); two timely novels written by Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Linden Hills* (1985); Toni Morrison's classic, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and her more recent novel, *Love* (2003); two of bestselling author Terry McMillan's novels, *Mama* (1987) and *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2002); and, finally, the books which make up Octavia Butler's epic science fiction series known as her *Patternmaster* (or sometimes *Patternist*) series, which was published in a single volume titled *Seed to Harvest* (2007). Octavia Butler's first published novel, *Patternmaster* (1976) was the first book in this series to appear. From 1977 until 1984, she published four additional novels in the series: *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980) and *Clay's Ark* (1984). Butler later expressed a dislike for the novel *Survivor*, so she declined to bring it back into print. Consequently, *Survivor* is not included in *Seed to Harvest*.

Looking at this selection of books reveals how African American women writers from different eras have confronted domestic violence through their literary depictions. Examining these authors' literary treatment of domestic abuse also demonstrates that domestic violence has a history and that its history has changed dramatically—and within a relatively short period of time.

As part of its project, this book also seeks to address an underexplored dynamic: the relationship between the abuse of individual women and the larger structure of oppression that African American women face. This book illustrates the connection between these two (albeit sometimes seemingly distinct) problems. The principal arena where these two problems meet and come to a head is in the domestic sphere and within the family structure. Though not always acknowledged by common perceptions of it, the family, as a social structure, actually belongs to the private sphere and public sphere alike. The problems and limitations that individual women encounter within their homes relate to, overlap with, and in some ways

mirror the broader social problems that women face as a group. Moreover, there is a link between societal expectations and views about females and the way individual women are treated by their families. This connection has the potential to affect various aspects of women's lives and experiences, but a particularly difficult and dangerous outcome of this link is that the problem of domestic violence against women—a problem that is always both personal and political—is perpetuated within our society because of how we, as a society, situate the family within our culture. Our society relies upon the various political and economic functions of the family to maintain the larger sociopolitical structure, yet insists on viewing much of what happens within the domestic sphere, and within the family structure, as a private matter. The supposedly private nature of the home thus conspires to cover up and justify incidents of domestic abuse.

This book explores the relationship between the personal and the political with respect to the issue of domestic violence by offering literary analyses of the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Terry McMillan, and Octavia Butler. This project considers how these authors portray domestic abuse and investigates how their literary depictions of domestic violence are responsive to a variety of cultural and historical forces. One facet of this book's central argument is that there has been a significant transformation in terms of how society has viewed domestic violence since Hurston so profoundly confronted the issue in her 1937 novel. Since the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there have been further shifts in terms of societal attitudes about the problems. Indeed, even between the late 1960s, when Morrison was busy writing *The Bluest Eye*, through the beginning of the 21st century when she published *Love*, cultural attitudes have transformed widely with respect to domestic abuse—and these changes can be traced by examining the novels produced during this period. The 1930s represents a time period when domestic issue was seen as a nonissue. Indeed, a major criticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—and Hurston as a writer, in general—is that her fiction was too domestic and utterly apolitical (as if politics and the domestic sphere were mutually exclusive). Many critics dismissed this novel precisely because it deals with the politics of the domestic sphere and, moreover, Hurston's contemporary reviewers and critics ignored the numerous and rampant incidents of domestic violence, which not only make up so much of the action of the novel but which also prove pivotal to the development of the novel's protagonist.

If *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reflects an era when domestic abuse

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was treated as a nonissue, the time span that begins with 1960s and continues to the 1980s constitutes a period characterized by denial of the problem of domestic violence, a denial that is reflected in much of the fiction of that time. Literary representations of domestic abuse in the late 20th and early 21st centuries show a period that signals a shift to an imperfect recognition of the problem. By using several literary works as examples, this book traces the relationship between society's changing attitudes about domestic violence and the way particular authors not only address the issue, but also complicate our understanding of it. The different authors and texts considered all share a common trait in that they all raise awareness about the issue of domestic abuse, yet they differ from one another with respect to how they engage with the problem.

Addressing domestic abuse not only means engaging with a controversial topic, but it also means dealing with a concept that is very much in flux because of how the term has grown over time to include a wide range of offenses, some of which would not have been characterized as problematic, let alone abusive, in the past. Discussing domestic violence means having to rely on labels that are altogether insufficient to describe it and the myriad problems associated with it—terms such as “domestic abuse,” “domestic violence,” and “intimate abuse,” which are too broad and too vague to sufficiently address the variety and range of offenses subsumed under those labels. Writing about domestic abuse also means considering its history and addressing how American society and our medical, psychological, and legal communities have, alternately, dealt with, tried to deal with, and failed to deal with the host of problems associated with it. These issues, which would be necessary to discuss in any examination of domestic violence, are especially crucial to this project, which seeks to highlight how contemporary African American female authors' portrayals of domestic abuse respond both directly and indirectly to a variety of cultural and historical forces including medical, psychological, and legal discourses/debates, the nation's political leanings, racial and socioeconomic issues, and attitudes about human rights, including women's and civil rights.

Significantly, the authors addressed in this project not only reflect but also oftentimes contribute to these complex and interrelated forces. Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Terry McMillan, and Octavia Butler complicate our understanding of domestic abuse in several ways. In their literary works, these writers depict characters who commit an assortment of offensive behaviors that all could

be labeled as domestic abuse. These behaviors range from yelling, taunting, and threatening, to slapping, pinching, kicking, punching, and beating. In the novels in question here, females are—sometimes figuratively, other times literally—locked up in their homes. They are also forced into marriages, made to undergo abortions, used as breeders against their will, and subject to a range of sexual abuse including child molestation, statutory rape, child rape, and rape; both arson and multiple murders figure into the novels in question. Though the offenses depicted in these novels run the gamut, two common threads bind them together: they all occur within the home, and their perpetrators, witnesses, accomplices, and victims are intimately acquainted with one another. By including a range of offenses in their novels, these authors not only highlight what the term domestic violence has grown to include, but they also identify behaviors as domestic abuse that had not hitherto been considered as such. Yet another way Hurston, Jones, Morrison, Walker, Naylor, McMillan, and Butler engage with the issue is by showing how the supposedly “private” nature of the domestic sphere works to hide incidents of domestic abuse and leads to the problem’s being minimized. These authors’ portrayals also work to show the relationship between the larger structure of women’s oppression and the mistreatment and abuse women face in the home. Through these types of depictions these writers not only raise awareness about the problem, but they also reveal its political nature. They offer pointed critiques of society, by implicating the broader sociopolitical structure in justifying and covering up—and therefore perpetuating—the problem of violence in the home. Their representations of violence in the home work to underscore how even over a short period of time, society’s perspectives about domestic abuse have changed and continue to change.

By writing about domestic abuse, the authors considered in this book all raise awareness about the problem, yet the publication of their novels—novels which, of course, all center on domestic violence—also coincides with a heightened awareness of the problem in the medical and legal communities, as well as with more media attention being paid to the problem. Far from offering a static picture of women’s abuse and oppression, the characters and scenarios within these literary works demonstrate how ideas about women and the family have evolved over time. As the problem of domestic violence surfaces in these novels, so, too, do related concerns, including the bagginess of the term and the inadequacy in the way our society has dealt with the problem. Therefore, as part of this Introduction, it

is crucial to discuss some points related to my concerns about domestic violence—including how the family has been theorized historically and the etymology, connotations, and the complexity of the term domestic violence.

The Family as Public/Private

Just as Marx recognized, the family performs various crucial economic and political functions including the reproduction of a labor supply and the sustenance of current and future workers. Far from simply being a “private matter,” sexual reproduction has a specific political and economic dimension—reproduction guarantees a steady supply of future workers that can one day be exploited for profit as part of the system of capitalism. In fact, “reproduction and kinship are themselves integrally related to the social relations of production and the state,” a point scholar Rosalind Petchesky asserts as she discusses the intersection of labor, social class, and the domestic sphere (377). As Petchesky and others have argued, production plays a critical role by ensuring that there will be an ever ready pool of labor supply. Maintaining gender-specific roles within the family—both inside and outside the home—is absolutely necessary to the continuation of the current economic and sociopolitical system, as well. The various kinds of duties that women typically perform inside of the home—the countless hours women spend cooking, cleaning, bearing and rearing children, and caring for their spouses, among other tasks—is almost always unpaid labor and, as such, helps to maintain an exploitative system. It is not an accident, nor can it be attributed solely to biology, that women have ended up performing these jobs.

A trend that began in the 19th century and then intensified in the early part of the 20th century was the reorganization of labor during the industrial revolution, which caused many men to begin spending their daytime hours outside of the home, in the workplace. The mass exodus of men from the home to the workplace during working hours encouraged the widespread beliefs that household chores were so-called women’s work and the domestic sphere was the proper realm for women, and, as well as other factors, has contributed to how women are viewed by 20th and 21st century societies.

Though issues related to women and the labor they have historically performed, and often still perform, have been—and remain—extremely

complicated because of race and social class (not to mention other historically specific factors) feminists tend to agree that the work women do without receiving credit or payment is clearly one way women have been, and still are, exploited. Women who work outside of the home have other issues relating to exploitation to contend with, as well. These include discrimination, sexual harassment, and unequal pay, not to mention the myriad complexities that arise for the many working women who frequently take on the same responsibilities inside of their homes that their contemporaries who do not work outside of the home do.

Of course, race, too, plays a major role in terms of societal views about—and expectations of—women. A key example of a feminist who addresses the constellation of concerns related to race, economics, and gender is Angela Davis, a scholar who discusses women and the labor they perform in her book *Women, Race, and Class*. In that study, Davis addresses the complexity of the issues that dictate women's behavior. Although society plays a large role in determining what acceptable behavior is for women, it is often an individual woman's family who puts pressure on her to conform to society's expectations. Family, then, not only serves as a basic economic unit within the system of patriarchal capitalism, but it also has the distinct political function of helping to maintain its status quo. Although today many of us recognize that the family clearly has a distinct political function, the household and the family structure have been traditionally understood to be part of the private sphere.

Significantly, private and public spheres have historically—even going back to antiquity—been considered distinct and separate from one another. As Anita Allen explains, the Greeks “distinguished the ‘public’ sphere of the *polis*, or city-state, from the ‘private’ sphere of the *oikos*, or household”; the Romans similarly differentiated “*res publicae*, concerns of the community, from *res privatae*, concerns of individuals and families”; and, post-Enlightenment Western thought still recognizes the “classical premise that social life ought to be organized into public and private spheres” as well as the “premise that the private sphere consists chiefly of the home, the family, and apolitical intimate association” (461). She describes how this distinction has traditionally existed and how it has been traditionally understood:

The public realm was the sector in which free males, whose property and economic status conveyed citizenship, participated in collective governance. By contrast, the private realm was the mundane sector of economic and biological survival. Wives, children, slaves, and servants populated the private sphere, living as subordinate ancillaries to male caretakers [Allen, 461].

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The notion that the public and the private occupy two separate spheres had—and still has—a significant impact on how we think about a catalog of concerns including those relating to the family, privacy, equality, economics, and gender roles, to name just a few. Further, the idea that the public and the private constituted, and at least by some people's estimation still constitute, two distinct spheres privileged, and still privileges, certain classes of individuals and roles over others. Another effect of maintaining a distinction between the public and private realms is that, under the guise of protecting privacy, certain negative behaviors, including violence against women, are able to persist, even when they are clearly threatening or harmful. This is because they occur outside of the scope of what is considered public. Even today, in the 21st century, much of what happens in the home is seen by many as a private affair.

Although the distinction between private and public realms obscures and helps to minimize how large a problem domestic violence truly is—by, among other things, successfully covering up instances of it and treating it like a private matter—the split between private and public spheres is not the only factor contributing to this problem. Though domestic abuse is seen as an aberration by society (one that threatens the private sphere), it is actually a product of its organization. Domestic violence, and more broadly, violence against women are social practices that have arisen under the conditions of capitalism and male dominance. Importantly, however, what constitutes domestic violence and society's perceptions of, and reactions to, the whole host of problems associated with it are unstable concepts. In many regards the family replicates in a microcosm the anxieties and expectations of society at large, and as society's image of the family changes, so, too, do our perceptions of domestic violence. This serves to further suggest that domestic violence is very much a concept in flux.

Domestic Violence Is Both Personal and Political

Critical to understanding domestic violence—and its causes and consequences—is recognizing that domestic violence and all violence against women, for that matter, is foremost a political issue. In fact, as Lisa H. Schwartzman argues, violence against women—including rape and domestic violence—is fundamentally both a feminist and political issue, not merely a personal problem for the individual (or individuals) victimized. Though undoubtedly individuals so often tend to see their own abuse as

personal and frequently feel ashamed about it, as if they are somehow part of the problem or as if their abusers' behaviors would change if they somehow altered their behavior, it is important to recognize that this perception itself is a product of the larger sociopolitical system. Indeed, shame and self-recrimination are the mechanisms by which the ideological status quo is maintained. The roots of domestic violence are more sinister, complicated, and systematic than something we could simply attribute to individual human interactions. If domestic violence is both a personal problem—for the woman or women suffering because of it—and a political problem, one that affects women as a group and society as a whole, recognizing it as such will help to show the reasons why it is so prevalent and will help to uncover how domestic violence is part of a socially constructed system of abuse of women.

Domestic Violence: A Problematic Term

I have thus far been calling, and for the sake of clarity will continue to refer to, acts of violence against women and children by those close to them as domestic violence or domestic abuse, because these are the terms commonly used, but it is necessary to point out the inadequacy of this type of phrasing. My dissatisfaction with the terms domestic violence and domestic abuse is similar to the one that critics of the term sexual harassment frequently cite: these terms are both too broad and too vague. Domestic violence and domestic abuse are catch-all phrases that describe any number of problematic behaviors that range from emotional abuse like mocking, insults, and other types of putdowns, to various types of physical abuse such as punching, pinching, and kicking, but these terms can also refer to even graver offenses such as rape, maiming, attempted murder, and murder. The fact that these terms are used to describe such a wide range of abusive behaviors points to an inadequacy in both the way our society expresses and deals with an entire catalog of problems associated with abuse perpetrated against women by those close to them. The fact that we have failed to come up with a better way to describe this type of systematic violence against women is both frustrating and fitting, for it points to the larger problem of a culture of violence against women and a society that attempts to minimize the impact of violence against women. Using euphemisms or a catch-all phrase like domestic violence might even worsen the problem by either soft-pedaling the issue or further confusing it since

domestic violence can mean so many different things and can describe the most minor insults as well as the most egregious physical harm—and even worse.

This concern over labeling that arises when talking about domestic violence is a function of the malleability of all such terms. Akin to the argument about the concept of child abuse made by Ian Hacking in his article “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse,” I am contending here that our concept of what constitutes domestic violence is not only too broad, but also historically variable. Hacking persuasively argued that child abuse “is not one fixed thing” and claimed that “since 1962 the class of acts falling under ‘child abuse’ has changed every few years” (259). Similarly, what society counts as domestic violence has changed over time.

Looking at the history of the term domestic violence further illuminates the myriad problems surrounding the issue. The *OED* does not have an individual listing for the term domestic violence; the entry for “domestic violence” is a subcategory within the entry “domestic.” More disturbing, perhaps, is the lack of history reported for the term domestic violence in the *OED* entry, and that there is hardly any mention of the issue of domestic violence in all but the most recent books that discuss the family and theorizations of the family—indeed, both the term itself and references to the types of problems associated with domestic violence are conspicuously missing from many discussions and theorizations of the family. It’s difficult to find discussions about domestic abuse in books about the family that were published before the 1990s. In fact, the term domestic violence and its synonyms—domestic abuse, spousal abuse, wife beating, etcetera—are seldom, if ever, mentioned in books on the family and theorizations of the family from even the 1970s and 1980s. Sadly and tellingly, many of these books’ indices have no mention whatsoever of the term domestic violence (or affiliated terms).

Domestic violence is a prevalent problem, but it has for so long merited so very little attention in books from a wide range of academic disciplines, including sociology, history, psychology, and the law, as well as those intended for a more general audience, all of which at least purport to address the family in society and contemporary theorizations of the family. Taken together, these observations suggest several possibilities: domestic violence is an aberration, and thus, has no place in a functioning, stable family; domestic violence is a private matter, something to be dealt with inside the family; and domestic violence is a taboo subject, something not to be addressed or even mentioned. If the possibilities mentioned here seem