

***Bone Black* : The Black Life Narrative As Feminist Protest**

Shyamshree Basu

Bone Black by bell hooks charts her own experiences of growing up as a black girl. Negotiating the difficult terrain of being a black girl in a racist society, hooks' memoir inevitably brings Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* to mind. hooks faithfully records the memories of her girlhood and there is the same sincerity in her creative enterprise as a Morrison or a Walker, for whom the most important function of writing is to bear witness. *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple* are landmark texts in the African American canon that document the trials and tribulations of the African American women trying to define themselves. hooks' girlhood memories show the distinctive concerns of an African American woman writer. She also incorporates every aspect of Southern life and critiques the ways in which individual members of the family and community aid or deters a young girl from attaining a positive sense of self. In fact African American women's literature frequently portrays the protagonist undertaking a quest or a journey for self-actualization. Thus Black life narratives starting from the time of the slave narratives have a narrative trajectory which features the desire for freedom—individual as well as racial. The racial history of the Blacks in America make it inevitable that any text in order to have a proper, historicized voice must address the problems of racism and sexism (in the case of Black women) to which the Blacks have been subjected to. Thus Black narratives (life narratives or fictional ones) are examples of protest literature. Such narratives observe and critique the manifold ways in which the White culture tries to oppress and dominate the Blacks. The paper tries to explore how hooks' life narrative recalls other significant works within the African American autobiographical tradition and incorporates certain tropes and themes common not only to the African American woman's experience but to the growth of any Black artist in America. Wikipedia notes that narrative identity postulates individuals form their own identity by integrating their life experiences into an evolving story of the self which provides the individual with a sense of purpose and unity in life (Wikipedia). We shall observe how *Bone Black* is a text of self-actualization and yet foregrounds hooks' beliefs regarding race, gender, power and creativity in America.

From the time of the slave narratives black autobiographies have performed the important task of creating a dialectic relationship between society and the self. We have seen this in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Society, community and family seems to represent an oppressive structure which stalls the growth of the individual self. Even in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* the same narrative pattern is favoured. *Black Boy* written in the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, is more preoccupied with exploring black male subjectivity in the face of a white, patriarchal culture. George E. Kent in his article '*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Black Boy* as Autobiographical Tradition' has remarked that Wright or other autobiographers of that generation had faith in the purity of the American Dream and therefore aspired to locate to a space away from the oppressive society where the same dream would be stifled (Kent 162). Angelou represents a later development in the autobiographical tradition where there is an attempt to understand and respond to the rhythms of black life and depict 'the beauty and the absurdity of the community'

(Kent 163). The American Dream is not venerated as an ideal to be aspired for. Neither does the protagonist have to relocate to an area free from oppression to become a self-actualized person. In this regard it would be important to keep in mind the categories of narrative of immersion and narrative of ascent popularized by Robert Stepto. Robert Stepto in his study *From Behind the Veil*. Stepto has identified two common narrative patterns in the Black coming-of-age narratives: the narrative of immersion and the narrative of ascent. The ascent narrative takes the questing figure on a journey from an oppressed space to a liberated space and by the end of the text the figure has gained enough literacy to be called an articulate survivor. The immersion narrative, on the other hand, finds the questing figure in the space of oppression but free to be an articulate survivor (Stepto ix). These narrative patterns will be discussed in detail in the course of the paper.

hooks' narrative is one of immersion and her quest or coming-of-age is more of an emotional journey that she undertakes rooted to her Southern culture. Like Angelou one is alive to hooks' critique of the Black community but reading her memoir also reminds us of a number of literary predecessors that she might have been emulating. We see glimpses of Morrison in the uncompromising way in which she criticizes the Black community for its flaws. Alice Walker's presence is also decipherable in the ways in which she talks about black love and healing and the unpredictable ways in which they manifest themselves in a little Black girl's life. But *Bone Black* more than anything else is an attempt to trace the portrait of an artist growing up in a community and a family that does not encourage her to be different.

There is the same approach to black girlhood that we see in Angelou. By her own admission *Bone Black* is not an 'ordinary tale'. hooks writes in the foreword of her memoir:

It is the story of girlhood rebellion, of my struggle to create self and identity distinct from and yet inclusive of the world around me. Writing imaginatively, I seek to conjure a rich magical world of southern black culture that was sometimes paradisiacal and at other times terrifying. While the narratives of family life I share can be easily labelled dysfunctional, significantly that fact will never alter the magic and mystery that was present -all that was deeply life sustaining and life affirming. The beauty lies in the way it all comes together exposing and revealing the inner life of a girl inventing herself-creating the foundation of selfhood and identity that will ultimately lead to the fulfilment of her true destiny-becoming a writer.(hooks xi)

The staccato chapters present vignettes of hooks' girlhood experiences and from the very beginning hooks makes it clear that although she is a black girl she is much more than that generic tag makes her out to be. Coupled with the fact that the text records the fulfilment of her destiny hooks is also aware of the fact that recording girlhood memories in a text firmly ensconces it in a feminist tradition. The African American literary discourse has a strong feminist bias and hooks incorporates the themes of domestic abuse, racial as well as sexual oppression and healing which feature predominantly in an African American woman writers' oeuvre. Also since hooks looks at her life narrative as a narrative of rebellion we can never overlook the protest element in her text.

hooks cautions the readers to avoid looking at black girlhood in a monolithic manner. She argues that black families raise their daughters to exhibit various degrees of self-esteem and financially privileged families in the black community have a different notion of self-esteem than those who are not. Thus the story of a black girl who finds her fulfilment as a creative artist reveals some crucial aspects of the difficult task of negotiating self-identity for black women. However it is also interesting that one might find sufficient parallels between *Bone Black* and *Black Boy*. Jerry H. Ward, Jr has noted in his introduction to Wright's *Black Boy* that the text is a canonical one in Afro-American literary tradition since Richard, the protagonist, was critiquing the role of family, community and White society in his development of an artist. The critique is clinical to the point that it appears to dehumanize his parents but it is historically authentic. As Ward notes:

Recreating and inscribing himself in a particularized moment of American history from *angles available to an African American male*, [italics mine] Wright did not intend, as those who would censor his autobiography contend, to corrupt, scandalize or blaspheme. On the contrary his autography is designed to illuminate how obscene was denial of access to full participation in the democratic process by law, custom and the practice of race. *Black Boy* embodies its own defense as a classic response to the call of the most sacred American principles regarding human rights... *Black Boy* does explain the universal potential of the person who is socialized to be *Black and male* [italics mine] in an oppressive society. The text establishes the probability that as an autobiographical act, it spoke specifically for Wright. And Wright spoke specifically... for a *very distinct community*. [italics mine](Ward xv)

In recounting her girlhood memories hooks returns to her grandmother and mother –again and again. Like any other canonical author of the African American genre the matrilineal legacy is highlighted in the text. Here again hooks has tried to show them as women who have aided or impeded her sensibility as a creative artist and a different kind of child. The women (especially her grandmother), teaches her the meaning of preserving the legacy of the ancestors. The portraits of hooks' grandmother and her mother are not done stereotypically and nowhere is there any attempt to make them conform to the image of the Black matriarch or mammy figure. hooks calls her grandmother Saru instead of Sara and it is through her that she learns the need to preserve one's self-identity and racial memory. This is what hooks tells the reader about Saru:

Saru tells me that white folks and even some niggers like to make fun when a colored person says that they are part Indian but she says in those days there were many such unions, many such marriages. She talks sadly about this need in people to make other people deny parts of themselves. She tells me that a person cannot feel right in their heart if they have denied parts of their ancestral past, that this not feeling right in the heart is the cause of much pain. When she was a little black girl people remembered their homes in Africa, spoke languages different from English, and understood many things about life that white folks did not understand. She said they stopped talking about Africa because that was how the white folks wanted it. Saru thinks that black people could talk about their Indian kin because they knew them in the present, that this was a heritage other than slavery to lay claim to. She lays claim to it. She tells me the stories over and over so I will know them, so I will pass them on. (49-50)

Thus Saru inculcates the most important aspect of African American living to her granddaughter: the need to bear witness to a troubled racial history through stories and other artefacts and most importantly to be aware of the manifold ways through which the white dominant culture oppresses and obliterates black culture. hooks' training as a black artist begins from this point onwards and gradually she is able to decipher the differences in her own personality as a young, black girl from that of other black girls of her acquaintance. It is this realisation that leads her to understand her vocation, i.e., to be a writer at the end of the memoir. Here again the comparisons with Richard Wright's *Black Boy* are inevitable. Wright also mentions repetitively his acute awareness that he is different from others in his community. But in *Black Boy* Richard is too critical of his family and community and he chooses to separate from it in order to further his literary ambition. But hooks finds the artist in the innermost recesses of her mind in conjunction with her community. Thus the process of self-actualization follows two very different types of trajectory and therefore parallels the narrative of ascent and the narrative of immersion popularized by Robert Stepto (mentioned above). According to Stepto:

The classic ascent narrative launches an 'enslaved' and semiliterate figure on a ritualised journey to a symbolic North ;the journey that is charted through spatial expressions of social structure ,invariably systems of signs that the questing figure must read in order to be both increasingly literate and increasingly free. The ascent narrative conventionally ends with the questing figure situated in the lest oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative ,and free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor.(ix)

The immersion narrative subverts this narrative structure and the questing figure ends up in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of articulate kinsman. Stepto himself has conceded that the African American literary tradition has matured considerably and the reader must not analyse the narrative as strictly belonging to either category .He cites Morrison's technique in *The Bluest Eye* which, according to him, is a mixture of both these narrative strategies in a plot which is essentially a coming of age story of a little black girl. We may also add that the 1980s saw a veritable explosion of black women writers on the literary scene and therefore hooks' memoir *Bone Black* has strong feminist elements of protest against the twin evils of racism as well as sexism. hooks, like Morrison, also critiques the Black community, especially its inability to evolve positive images of self and its susceptibility to images propounded by the dominant culture. hooks in her 'Foreword' faithfully acknowledge her debt to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. She writes:

I was still in my teens when I read this book .It shook me to the very roots of my being. There in this fictional narrative were fragments of my story-my girlhood...To see this period of our life given serious recognition was awesomely affirming...It wasn't simply that Morrison simply focused on black girls confronting issues of class, race, identity, girls who were struggling to confront and cope with pain. And most of all she gave us black girls who were critical thinkers, theorizing their lives, telling the story, and by so doing making themselves subjects of history.(hooks xii)

Thus hooks incorporates the element of protest very strongly in her memoir and the girlhood memories must be read in a properly historicized perspective of the 80's that was a decade of black women artists articulating through their work their ability to bear witness.

hooks' mother is one of those women often found in Black families who have to put up with domestic violence from their husbands. Although hooks is critical of her stoic endurance she tries to be empathetic to her character of a long suffering wife. hooks sincerely traces the complex contours of the mother-daughter relationship .In chapter 33 we encounter hooks telling her mother that she did not want to learn cooking, cleaning or any of the domestic duties since she did not want to get married. Although hooks is sixteen at the time she evaluates her parents' marriage unflinchingly and it also reveals to the reader the uneasy alliance between men and women in an African American household. Writing in third person she clearly points out her reason for her antipathy towards marriage:

She did not want her mother to know that it was precisely her marriage that made it seem like a trap, a door closing in a room without air.

She could not tell her mother how she became a different person as soon as the husband left the house in the morning, how she became energetic, noisy, silly, funny, fussy, strong, capable, tender, everything that she was not when he was around. When he was around she became silent. She reminded her daughter of a dog sitting, standing obediently until the master ,the head of the house ,gave her orders to move, to do this to do that, to cook his food just so, to make sure the house was clean just so. Her bed was upstairs over their bedroom. She never hears them making fun sounds. She heard the plaintive ,pleading voice of the woman-she could not hear what she was asking for ,begging for, but she knew that the schoolbooks ,the bit of pocket money, the new dresses, the everything had to be paid for with more than money, with more than sex.(hooks98)

Thus from a very young age she sees that marriage cast her mother into the role of a victim and her father epitomised a very common kind of predatory masculinity which was patronised by patriarchal society. hooks has written extensively about this kind of traditional, predatory masculinity that she calls patriarchal masculinity in her study *The Will to Change* and has proposed a transition into feminist masculinity as the need of the hour.

hooks' assessment of her parents' marriage becomes even harsher in the later sections of her memoir. There is a graphic description of a scene of domestic violence which she sees along with her other siblings .Her mother's placid submission to her husband's beatings shocks hooks and she cannot accept that this woman is her mother who does not even have the strength to resist her husband's blows. hooks recounts her response in the following manner:

She wants her to hit him with the table light, the ashtray, the one near at hand. She does not want to see her like this, not fighting back. He notices them [the children] ,long enough to tell them to get out ,go upstairs. She refuses to move. She cannot leave her mother alone. When he says What are you staring at, do you want some, too? she is afraid enough to move. She will not take her orders from him. She asks the woman if it is right to leave her alone. The woman-her mother-nods her

head yes. She still stands still. It is his movement in her direction that sends her up the stairs. She cannot believe all her brothers and sisters are not taking a stand, that they go to sleep. She cannot bear their betrayal. When the father is not looking she creeps down the steps. She wants the woman to know she is not alone. She wants to *bear witness*. [italics mine](hooks147)

It is clear that when the adult hooks recounts this incident of marital discord from her girlhood memories she sees her response as distinct from that of the different members of her family and in her willingness to stand by her mother despite her father's rage we see a kind of sisterhood which Black women have formed to sustain themselves and as a respite from the emotional turmoil of their lives. Also in this moment she does not flinch or escape as do the rest of her siblings but instead finds it in herself to bear witness. Thus even these moments that emotionally scar her become instrumental in shaping her consciousness as an artist.

It should be mentioned that hooks takes great pains to establish that her mother is not a weakling. In fact she is like a lot of other Black women who sustain their families in the absence of a strong male parent in the household. The Black mother-daughter relationship in this case is conditioned by love as well as a lack of understanding that women born in two different generations and connected by a biological bond, inevitably have. This is what hooks writes about her relationship with her mother:

I am most passionate in my relationship with mama...She is the one person who looks into my heart, sees its needs and tries to satisfy them. She is also always trying to make me be what she thinks is best for me to be...She wants to love and control at the same time...I want so much to please her and yet keep some part of me that is myself, my own, not just a thing I have been turned into that she can desire, like, or do with as she will. I want her to love me totally without wanting that she change anything, not even the things about her that I cannot stand.(hooks139-'40)

hooks also records her mother's inability to understand a daughter who thinks about death and loneliness from a very young age. She empathises with her mother's lack of understanding since she has suppressed her own feelings of loneliness for a very long time and has instead been working tirelessly to give her children a better life:

We can tell that our mama is not like other mothers. We can see that she is working hard to give us more than food, shelter and clothes to wear, that she wants to give us a taste of the delicious, a vision of beauty, a bit of ecstasy...Even so, she is moving away from her awareness of the deeper inner things of life and worrying more about money. I watch these changes in her and worry. I want her never to lose what she has given me -a sense that there is something deeper, something more to this life than the everyday.(hooks141)

In her need to understand her mother and her acknowledgement of her emotional distance from her hooks' words bring to our mind Angelou's remarks about her mother in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She remarks:

But which mother and daughter understand each other or have patience over each other's lack of understanding?(Angelou 68)

hooks' ability to understand her mother and her struggle also shows her to have one of the other distinctive characteristics of a Black writer (apart from the need to bear

witness), i.e., the need to understand and love each other in order to heal the community .Alice Walker calls this ability “womanist” and speaks about it extensively in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Thus the mother –daughter dialectic as it evolves in this memoir also shows hooks to have all the makings of a Black woman writer –able to bear witness and able to heal through her understanding and love. In fact, an analysis of the content of life narratives (Wikipedia) lists the thematic tropes of Agency and Communion as integral to the life narratives. Agency shows the extent of autonomy the protagonist enjoys and how far he/she is able to construct her identity independently. Communion on the other hand represents the narrator’s reliance on intimate friendships and reciprocal relationships in her quest for self-actualization. hooks blends these two tropes seamlessly in her narrative of immersion. She defines herself as a rebel figure but does not overlook or alienate herself from her racial identity or from members of her community. It may be mentioned here that hooks later goes on to celebrate Black sisterhood as well as Black maternal subjectivity in her works such as *Communion* and *Rock My Soul* by stating that Black women have been able to hold their communities and families together by creating circles of love.

She talks about certain members of the community who are termed crazy but are not put in asylums. Instead they live their lives in the community and hooks realises the logic of keeping these folks free .They remind the sane Black people to keep in touch with “these wounded parts of our selves”(BB 135).Thus hooks projects the Black community as having the wherewithal to develop into a self-actualized group and as being very different from the community projected by Morrison (Lorrain, Ohio) in her novel *The Bluest Eye* .hooks also talks about the love and affection that she gets in her community from the most surprising sources. She mentions Miss Erma, a founder of the local church. She makes it a habit to give hooks little gifts to show her appreciation for her scripture reading and when she receives it she starts believing in a wonderful and mysterious love. hooks’ young mind also remembers some male members of her family and community who are very different from her father. One of these men was the deacon of their church and there was something about him that made it easy for her to befriend him. There is also Daddy Gus, her mother’s father who helps her like Saru to make her understand the importance of stories for writers. This is how hooks evaluates his worth:

He teaches me to listen to the stories things tell, to appreciate their history. He has many notebooks, little black notebooks filled with faded yellow paper. I understand from him that the notebooks are a place for the storage of memory. He writes with a secret pencil; the pages seemed covered in ash left by the fire we have visited .This fire he says now burns inside us.(hooks87)

These men have a particular relevance in her girlhood recollections. It is because they remind her that Black men could evolve into loving, emotionally centred individuals. Perhaps these men would become the basis of her theory for evolving a feminist masculinity which would do away with aggressive, patriarchal masculinity.

Although hooks spent a lot of time on revisiting the people of her family and her community from the past, she does not forget that this memoir concerns her development as an artist. Hence the emphasis on her growing up and her emotional maturity become

important points in her text. In all those chapters where she talks about her evolving self there is a need to convince the reader of her own uniqueness, of her own distinctive personality. Thus she looks back on her desire to get her hair straightened like other Black girls hoping to be in their intimate circle but realises soon enough that such an imitation is actually a betrayal of your true self and your racial identity. She is equally candid about her sexual awakening and does want to wear the colour black to express her feminine self, much to the outrage of her mother. There is also an episode of her enjoying the pleasures of masturbation. But through all these experiences she holds the knowledge that she is separate, special and distinct from others within herself. She finds it a blessing to lose herself in poetry and even when she discovers painting she uses the colours to describe the wilderness of her spirits. However her separateness makes her feel lonely and she feels as if this loneliness will drive her towards insanity. It is during that hour of emotional crisis that a Catholic priest comes to her aid and tells her that this moment of self-doubt is only a prelude to attaining greater knowledge of self. This knowledge will finally empower her to celebrate life and love herself.

Finally the moment comes. After reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* she finally accepts herself for what she is.

At night when everyone is silent and everything is still, I lie in the darkness of my windowless room, the place where they exile me from the community of their heart, and search the unmoving blackness to see if I can find my way home. I tell myself stories, write poems, record my dreams. In my journal I write-I belong to this place of words. This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself.(hooks183)

The last lines of the memoir recalls Richard Wright's *Black Boy* where Richard realises that he has to make his voice heard as a Black man who has moved North from the Jim Crow South and has gained sufficient knowledge to be an articulate kinsman (to use Stepto's phrase). But as a woman hooks knowledge of self is inextricably linked with the knowledge of herself as daughter, granddaughter and as a member of a community. Thus her memoir is more of a narrative of immersion as it does register protest against racism and sexism within and outside the Black community and family without the writer moving away from her own space in her community and family. As an artist hooks retreats to the bone black inner cave but her separateness is not the solipsism of Wright and it holds the promise to regenerate her as well as heal her community making her destiny as a writer, an inevitable one. *Bone Black* marks a significant chapter in the history of African American women's memoirs. Like her illustrious predecessors such as Sojourner Truth and Maya Angelou bell hooks bears witness to the manifold dimensions of being an African American woman. Thus the life narrative graduates from being a simple bildungsroman to a socio-historical document of a particular time and place. The text may be read as a life narrative, as a coming-of-age narrative, as a feminist text with a womanist bias and also as a specimen of protest literature. From whichever perspective it is read it withstands critical scrutiny and anticipates hooks later development into a respected black artist and critic of the twentieth century.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Ballantine Books. 1997. Print.

Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation
Vol IX No 2 December 2013

- hooks, bell. *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Communion: The Female Search for Love*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. New York: Atria Books, 2003. Print.
- hooks, bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*. New York: Atria Books, 2004. Print.
- Kent, George E. "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Autobiographical Tradition". *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995. 162-'70. Print.
- Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1979. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983 .Print.
- Ward, Jerry.W. "Introduction ". *Black Boy (American Hunger):A Record of Childhood and Youth* .New York: Harper Collins,1996.xi-xix.Print.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy (American Hunger):A Record of Childhood and Youth* .New York: Harper Collins,1996.Print.
- "Narrative Identity." *Wikipedia:The Free Encyclopaedia*.Wikimedia Foundation,Inc.(28 February 2013).Web.(8 September 2013).<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_identity>.