

Olympia's Maid and the Oppositional Gaze: Reclaiming the Subjectivity of the Black Female

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Abstract: *The constant struggle against marginalisation, fetishisation has forced women artists and scholars to deploy, amongst many strategies, their own bodies as subject matter to confront and negotiate issues of representation and in context of black female artists to comprehend their black bodies as a site on which these struggles are negotiated. The epistemic violence operates by a process of splitting on both sides of the division. Just as masculinity constructs femininity as a double- simultaneously Madonna and whore- racism also constructs the black subject as both a 'noble savage' and violent avenger. We must uncover from the layers of a secular rhetoric that defines women as a substance culling all aspirations that lead to the formation of an internal world of political awareness, aggressively commodifying the female sexuality in a rapidly expanding world economy. Diana Angaitis notes that the female body is a highly contested site; its flesh is both the recipient and source of desire, lust and hatred. The body is an interesting object of political theory upon which ethnic and societal values are inscribed to enhance ideological needs. Fiona Carson states that in the seamless trajectory of Western art history, one might assume that art is the province of men while the place of women is in the picture as model or muse. Women are the tabula rasa upon which the men impose their narcissistic fantasies which places their pursuit within the tradition of heroically dissolute virility. Femininity is an excrescence of the notion of possession, a non-human force designating the female under the compound sign of the animal, ghostly and angelic as desire imbues intellectual structures with an erotic energy that sensualises them and by appearing in the celestial light of transfiguration, their flame is defamiliarised. The female nude is the possession of the male spectator. However Berger cites Manet's nude Olympia as the turning point of this tradition where the ideal is broken as she gazes back at us. Black feminists have forced women's movement from a celebration of universality to be concerned with implications of differences among women's experiences and argue that it is not for artistic conventions that Manet has included Laure but to create an ideological binary which stands as a signifier of all the racial stereotypes of the West and reformulates the Cartesian perspective that allows whiteness as the only subject of consideration where the non-white body has been made opaque by a blank stare. Mulvey delineates exclusionary perspectives which inundate white female body as a totalising categorisation of all women. The oppositional gaze serves as a gesture of resistance to not only the phallogocentric logic but towards the oppression of minorities through cinema by the all inclusive gendering of women. By subtle parody and rupturing of traditional ways of viewing and seeing the black female body we can deconstruct some of the chauvinism or episteme we are accustomed by refuting negative stereotypes about their body as between colonialism and patriarchy, the women have disappeared not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the Third World Woman.*

Key Words: Confrontational gaze, oppositional gaze, racial stereotypes, epistemic violence, visual culture, Olympia, Laure.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The study of the Orient by Western scholars has made the multifarious East into an object frozen in time by the gaze of Western percipients. It reduces the people studied to the West's 'silent Other' and prevents those studied from having a voice in the study of themselves as the encounter entails an unequal power dynamic in which the Western practitioner tries to exert influence. Apparently unable to represent themselves, 'Others' are represented by those who know more about them than they know about themselves. This knowing is attributed to the coloniser who can see the colonised from different perspectives and is able to generate apparently valuable insights. There is no exchange of dialogue as the author of a treatise on the New World was a colonial explorer who stood on some "faraway beach" and encountered the Other but could record the preconceptions he had brought with him. Carolyn Porter implies that the plenitude of alien voices which power amalgamates can be heard if we listen to them. They lie beyond the frame of our ethnocentric discourse speaking in discourses of their own. According to Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak and Zhang Longxi, information is retrieved when our communication with the alien is unmediated by the

powerful presuppositions we bring into the encounter. Nations should not be parochial and centripetal or guided by self-aggrandisement but poised towards a politically enlightened community of nations through the espousal of a centrifugal outlook, multilateral imagination and reciprocal recognition. The chasm between the East and the West was created by the West's unwarranted contempt for the East as the blindness of contempt is more hopeless than the blindness of ignorance for contempt kills the light which ignorance merely leaves unignited. Both the civilisations have the ability to develop a mutually rewarding relationship which would be premised on openness to cultural eclecticism. The West must overcome its ignoble triumphalism, intentional ignorance and forcible parasitism and seek to understand the East in a true spirit of creativity but what finally emerges is a statement of power and a claim for absolute authority which finally constitutes the framework of racism.

The year 1492 when Columbus discovered America was epoch making and psychologically momentous as a New World was revealed to be marvelled at and converted to Christianity. It was to relieve suffering that State and Church colluded to take slaves to the New World from Africa to work in the mines and replace the indigenous Caribs who had succumbed to the rigours of forced labour. On the African coast, alcohol and iron bars were traded against prisoners captured in internal wars while the Middle Passage took them as commodities across the Atlantic to be sold to planters and produce tobacco, coffee and the labour intensive sugar which returned to Europe where a snobbish fashion for sweet coffee became a habit and a necessity. Legal, commercial and religious attitudes combined to entrench a sense of the white man's superiority and the benefits of naked self-interest were allowed to override humane considerations. The eighteenth century impulse towards classification and categorisation led scientists to explore Blacks as fit for work in the tropics believing on Biblical authority that the 'Blacks were scorched by the sun.' Science, reason and capitalism reinforced each other against the Black as slave owners proved impervious to the blandishment of abolitionists just as realpolitik ignores political idealism. The transport of African women was promoted not just to satisfy slaves' carnal needs but to have acclimatised children who would grow into slavery and save the hassle of importing. The presumed animality of Negroes led to fantasies about their sexual prowess giving rise to a subsidiary form of exploitation in titillating pornography. The white slave owners promoted the notion that in Negroes all the passions and emotions are wholly subservient to their sexual instinct and this construction of the oversexed black parlayed into notions of bestiality and primitivism. The nation thus swung into masculine selfishness, self-satisfied productivity and mechanical inventiveness as the humanitarian aspect and its compassionate perceptiveness was not valued which was reinforced by the sense of a macho mentality which had imperial leanings.

Colonialist literature is an exploration of a world at the boundaries of civilisation, a world that has not been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology. The coloniser's invariable assumption about his moral superiority suggests that he will not be inclined to expend his energy in understanding the alterity of the Other. The colonialist's military superiority ensures a complete projection of his self on the Other as he destroys without any significant qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social and political system and imposes his own version of these structures on the colonised. The European settler subjugates the native and allows his identity to become dependent on his position as master. This enforced recognition from the colonised amounts to the European's narcissistic self-recognition as the native is considered too degraded and inhuman to be credited with any specific subjectivity and he is cast as a recipient of the negative elements of the self which the European projects onto him. Thus the subject is eclipsed by his fixation and fetishisation of the Other. The fetishising strategy allows the writer to transform historical dissimilarities into metaphysical difference. The ideological function as Abdul Jan Mohammed claims is to dehistoricise the conquered world, to present it as a metaphysical fact of life. Dinesen notes that if African natives are collapsed into African animals and mystified into magical essence of the continent, then there cannot be any meeting ground between the social, historical creatures of Europe and the metaphysical alterity of the Calibans and Ariels of Africa and the process of civilising the natives will continue indefinitely. The Manichean allegory functions as a mechanism as of the affective pleasure derived from the moral superiority and material profit that motivate imperialism on one hand and the formal devices such as stereotyping of colonialist fiction on the other.

There must be attempts to rewrite the body of colonised man which has been dismembered and castrated as of the destructive gaze which the coloniser has inflicted upon him. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon equates a reanimated body with the liberated voice of the revolutionary intellectual. In Simone Schwarz Bart's novel *The Bridge of Beyond* and Rene Depestre's *Rainbow for the Christian West*, the fantasy of an unencumbered body is an imaginative strategy designed to resist the desecrating force of her oppressive world. The character yearns for a world divested of fixed meaning. The morne or hill which offers refuge exerts vertical pull upon the protagonist to counteract the downward pull of the plain with which fiery destruction and physical entrapment are associated.

The African women whose minimal predication as indeterminate is available to the phallogocentric gives us a perfect allegory of the general violence as between patriarchy and colonialism, they have disappeared not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the Third World Woman. The publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1969 has been recognised as inaugurating a tradition of questioning images of women in literature. In Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* and in Gilbert and Gubar's *A Madwoman in the Attic*, the dominant image of the female was inevitably a figure of angelic beauty and an embodiment of a certain kind of selflessness epitomised in Coventry Patmore's *An Angel in the House*. The woman

who refused to conform to the perspective codes was dubbed by the male imagination as a 'power of disorder nocturnal, mouthpiece of the underworld gods, an internal enemy who corrupts without any sign of combat, a black continent, sphinx of dissolution, the depths of the unintelligible.' The mysterious woman is precisely a male view of women which do not locate women socially, they remove her from history and make them eternal symbols and is reparation of woman's exclusion from the affairs of particular historical societies. If womanhood is converted into the eternal puzzle, they become incapable of fighting oppression. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar in *Challenging Imperial Feminism* remind their readers that it is the autonomous activities of Black women which have forced the white woman's movement from a celebration of universality and sameness to be concerned with the implications of differences among women's experiences. Black women serve as the emblem of otherness in feminist theory. Such a reification of 'black woman's identity' as determined not only by gender but also by race establishes a functional identity for black women as the repository of all that is other to feminist theory. Thus the white feminist understands herself as simultaneously privileged by race and marginalised by gender and sexuality. George Best recounts that the black man had the power to subjugate his partner's whiteness, to make both his victim and her offspring resemble him, to make both of them black which is a literal blackness in the child and a metaphysical blackness in the sexual partner. In *Othello*, Desdemona becomes 'thou black weed' and the white pages of her book becomes blackened as Othello imagines 'whore' inscribed across them. Shakespeare's representation of Desdemona as virtuous and desiring and her choice in love as heroic rather than demonic unlike Othello dislocates the conventional ideology of gender the play enacts. Western Feminists becomes the true subjects of this counter discourse while Third World Woman never rises above the debilitating generality of their object status. Postcoloniality is a vaguely defined ontological marginality that is applicable to all minority discourses. Both the categories of 'women' and 'race' assume the status of metaphors so that each rhetoric of oppression can serve as a mirrored allegory for the other. Ania Loomba and Abena Busia suggests that the 'deliberate unvoicing' of African woman in colonial literature has been seconded by the strategic exclusion of gender analysis from colonial discourse studies.

2. COMMODIFICATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY AND BLACK FEMINISM:

According to Bell Hooks, scholars should take an 'oppositional gaze' towards the images of the Black women as many marginalised groups are stereotyped including women from all ethnic backgrounds, oppressive images are more damaging as there are fewer realistic images to counter these negative representations. This requires us to critically examine, challenge and deconstruct these images to reflect more accurate representation. The idea that African women were sexually promiscuous stemmed from the European's first encounter with these black women. The practise of polygamy among the African community was attributed to uncontrolled lust and sexual appetites while tribal dances were construed as orgies. The African women were delineated as Jezebel which gave the impression that black women could not be rape victims as they desired sex which legitimises the rhetoric of sexual assault by white males. Black women had little legal recourse when raped by White men and many Black women were also reluctant to report their sexual victimisation by Black men as of the fear that they may be lynched. The black woman who records her rape faces the arduous task of reaffirming her sexual autonomy without perpetuating the racist myths that associate her with illicit sexuality.

The black female body is doubly fetishised and historically removed from paternalistic cultural practices which protected white female sexuality. Black woman situated as both 'racial' and 'sexual other' within colonial discourse have undergone unique cultural representation which have positioned them within a dialectical relationship with white women. The historical dichotomisation of white and black women has positioned white women as objects/nature and black woman as animal/Nature to the centrality of white male subject. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that the white female body is submitted to the civilising effects of culture and becomes a visualisation of idealised white womanhood. Black women does not receive any redeeming dose of nature as their black skin becomes the ultimate sign of sexual deviance which allowed overtly sexualised images to remain in the realm of art as they remain at the border between art and pornography and breaches the arbitrary boundary of sexual propriety. The white female nude is securely positioned within the realm of the beautiful and was defined by the control of the woman as contained matter, civilised nature and restricted sexuality. Paintings of white woman on the other hand was cautiously monitored, a policing of the arbitrary divide between art and pornography to protect idealised white womanhood. White bourgeoisie woman represented passive sensuality as it enabled the male gaze which preserved virtue and innocence for the white woman. The Kantian notion of the sublime is characterised by the uncontrolled and limitless nature of the represented subject. The black female positioned within this realm and their representation as beyond containment resulted in exoticised, sexualised and animalised images. Manet's *Olympia* (1863) is the portrait of a prostitute controlling the economic value of her sexuality and acknowledged the unashamed awareness of the spectator's desire by thwarting the tradition of the voyeuristic male viewer. The unsettling nature of the portrait was the presence of her black female servant, Laurie. Within western art, the representation of white and black women in the same canvas or frame has denoted the transference of a macabre and sinister black sexuality onto the purity of the white woman. Manet's black maid is thus a marker of the carnality and filth of the white prostitute with which she is juxtaposed. The manipulation of body hair is also a trope used by Western artists to represent the female body.

According to Charles Bernheimer, the exclusion of public hair from representation of white female bodies contributes to the representation of female submission by eliminating the hint of animal passion and physical desire suggested by hairy growth. The hair also serves to disqualify black women from the Eurocentric category since public hair may hide the lack of the phallus but “is somehow too close to being the lack, which is why it cannot be shown.”

3. COUNTERACTING LACK OF KNOWLEDGE WITH COGNITION:

Michael Foucault describes domination in terms of ‘relations of power’ while emphatically stating that in all relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance and invites the critical thinker to search those margins and gaps through the body where agency can be found. When black people had the opportunity to look at films and television, they realised that mass media was a power construct that allowed new bodies of knowledge to emerge and conversely knowledge induced effects of power by maintaining white supremacy. Poets have written legends of good women and have had their visions of fair women. The Eternal Feminine is the only ideal woman par excellence and they can reach alpine heights unattainable by ordinary human beings and she has been portrayed in ways as different as Spenser’s Gloriana and Shakespeare’s Desdemona. The white woman was a ‘lass unparalleled’ as she is ‘God’s vision of pure thought/Composed in His creative mind (Act ii, *Abhijana Shakuntalam*), she ‘excels the quirks of blazoning pens/And in the essential vesture of creation/ Does tire the ingener.’ In *Othello*, Desdemona retains her love for her husband and this is what fills us with awe and admiration. Her end is piteous as she has sacrificed herself at the altar of love. The heroine is thus raised to celestial heights and we have no difficulty in recognising aspects of the Ewig- Weibliche or the Eternal Feminine. It was the oppositional gaze that responded to the looking relations by developing independent black cinema. In *The Technology of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis asserts that Black female spectators had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs their presence as absence that denies the body of the black female and a phallogocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is ‘white.’ In *A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification*, Anne Friedberg stresses that identification can be made through recognition and all recognition is an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo as even though representation of Black women were present in film, their bodies were there to enhance white womanhood as object of phallogocentric gaze. Julie Burchill describes this absent presence of women in films where women have been mothers without children or Mammies. Christian describes her as black in race and fat with enormous breasts; her head is perpetually covered with her trademark kerchief to hide the kinky hair that made her ugly. Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits as she is strong, she certainly has enough girth but this strength is used in the service to her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check. She is kind and loyal for she is a mother and therefore sexless. In this representation of black woman, one could find analogy with Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question* where the nationalists in Third World countries have constructed a dichotomy revolving around ghar (home) and bahir (world) which could be transposed into a homologous dichotomy of outer and inner spheres of sovereignty. The denial of agency and subjectivity is part of a dialectical process where the material being of woman is transformed into a disembodied sign or the Great Grand Mother archetype. It betrays tension that it experienced in its attempt to allocate proper place to a gradually emerging force that is lurking within the geographical boundary of the country, namely its women. The ‘new woman’ marked only an incomplete freedom for women who were allowed to be educated and westernised in their behaviour but they could not jeopardise the feminine domain of domesticity, the spiritual haven which was the repository of cultural tradition. In the Indian context, the restricted bhadramahila was projected as the domestic incarnation of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of domestic prosperity. She embodies dharma as opposed to her antithesis Alakshmi which was obliquely associated with the figures of a bibi or a veshya whose positioning within the imagined geography of the nation posed crucial problems. Another important determinant in the nationalist construction of femininity is sexuality or rather the lack of it. Patriarchy thrives on the denial of female sexuality, through the valorisation of the desexualised mother figure or Virgin Mary, the Mother Dolorosa or through the condemnation of sexual excess or promiscuity in the bibi. When Gandhiji prioritised naritva over purusatva, he emphasised the traditional Indian belief in the primacy of maternity over conjugality in feminine identity. The nationalist glorification of women and the nation as ‘mother’ was responsible for her double marginality. The Black women were also portrayed as Sapphires who drove their children and partners away with their domineering and overbearing natures. Her assertive demeanour identifies her with the Mammy but unlike the Mammy she is devoid of maternal compassion. Social scientists claimed that Black women’s dominance and the matriarchal status of the family was responsible for the unemployment and emasculation of Black men rather than discriminatory social policies and economic inequalities. Burchill wrote that “she was unthreatening to white audience; she was someone whom the white and black audience could hate. Scapegoated on all sides. We laughed with the black men, the white people and we did not even long to be there on the screen. How could we long to be there when our image visually constructed, was so ugly. We did not want our construction to be this abhorrent black female thing-this foil, backdrop. Her black female body was not the body of desire.” The garrulous woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman; her open mouth is the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere. Hence the diction that associates ‘silent’ with ‘chaste’ and stigmatises woman’s public speech as a behaviour fraught with cultural signs. In Homer’s *The Odyssey*, the Sirens are depicted as formidable

adversaries whose song enraptures man and lead them to their inevitable death. Monique Wittig in *Les Guerrilleres* seizes upon the Sirens and appropriates them as a powerful image of female identity. Most of the adversaries, Odysseus encounters during his trials are women and the threat they pose stems predominantly from their open mouth as power and voice are considered as sinister when they belong to a female. This reflects the obsessive energy invested in exerting control over the unruly woman. With their mouths, the site of threatening female voice erupts as they attack existing convention and brings death to patriarchal dominance that culls all aspirations that might lead to the formation of an internal world of political awareness. There were insertions of violating representations through the image of the “tragic mulatto”, the sensual black beauty who did not want to be confined by blackness, who did not want to be negated as white womanhood was the racialised sexual difference occupying stardom in mainstream narrative films. Black female spectators who refused to identify with white womanhood, the phallogocentric gaze of desire and possession created a critical space where the binary opposition as Mulvey posits in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, of ‘woman as image and woman as the bearer of the look’ was continually deconstructed. The ‘act of analysis, of deconstruction and of reading against the grain’ as Annette Kuhn observes in *The Power of the Image* offers an ‘additional pleasure, of saying no to structures which asks us to consume the dominant ideology uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways.’ The black female spectator challenge stereotypical notions that place them outside the realm of filmic discursive practices as she inverts the ‘real life power structure.’ Feminist theory rooted in ahistorical psychoanalytical framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses recognition of race, re-enacting the erasure of black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion of racialised sexual difference. The power of black women to make films will be threatened and undermined by the white male gaze that seeks to reinscribe the black female body in a narrative of voyeuristic pleasure where the only relevant opposition is between the active male and the female who is placed in the position of a victim. These elements occurs through the fragmentation of body in close-ups, occasional playing down of the illusion of screen depth to create one dimensionality that suggests objectification. In Sankofa’s *Passion of Remembrance*, black females are at the center of the narrative. The protagonists Louise and Maggie challenge the conventional norms and replace them with new understanding of the complexity of black identity. Dressing to go to a party, they look at one another, staring in mirrors completely focused on their encounter with black femaleness. They display their bodies not for voyeuristic colonising gaze but for that look of recognition that affirms their subjectivity, that constitutes them as spectators. In a society that conceived of woman as absence, Sankofa conferred upon the black woman the signifying power of gender, thereby traditionally abdicating the power reserved for men. In a society where a relation between gender is embedded in an analogical web that aligns the feminine in a venerable series of linked hierarchies (head/body, king/subject), what the director advocates is not the hierarchical but the horizontal, the equal and the similar. With the post modern implosion of the canonical and the generic or Lyotard’s metanarratives, we find many marginal and hitherto invisible multinarratives emanating from the Orient, the colonised, the dispossessed, the ethnic, the feminine and the diasporic and as of certain historical contingencies, marginal literature needs to retrieve lost ground and has excavated some of the exhausted motifs of modernism like selfhood and the need to reclaim identity and the need to reinscribe it through myth and language. She is a created image interpellated by a host of prejudicial constructions but she cannot articulate this anguish through permissible socio-political channels as she has been denied a voice. Writing their history is a way for these marginalised people to contest their absence within the monologic master narrative of Western imperialist patriarchy. The created work is an etiological construct or an originating fiction, in terms of which the peripheral consciousness performs an act of relocation. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston addresses two intersecting sites of marginalisation within her experience, that of ethnicity and gender. In the third part, Shaman tells the story of the narrator’s mother Brave Orchid who contravened custom to go to Canton to become a doctor, she then follows her immigrant husband to America where she is reified by the Western gaze into the archetypal caricature. The narrator negotiates her contested identity as immigrant and female in a landscape haunted by the ghosts of racial stereotype. She plays out her own Bildungsroman by attempting to adjust to the contentious American gaze which refuses to allow her any agency by labelling her as a ‘yellow nigger.’ The final section ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ projects the legendary sai Yen who was captured by the barbarians, bore them children and sang her native folk songs but when she returned to her Han people, she recapitulated the barbarian’s song. The warrior woman’s heroism lies in reconciling cultures by resolving the fault line between the centre and the margin which harmonises the contradictions within the narrator’s own Chinese-American identity and readers are forced to confront the problematic of subaltern experience as Kingston projects a neo-modernist quest for identity and authenticity through the medium of art and myth by way of post modernist marginal discourse and self-reflexive textuality. Talpade Mohanty is content to draw attention to the binaries inherent in Western approach and to appeal to a deconstructive position to counter these stereotypical divisions as he proclaims that “insofar as Women and the East are defined as others and peripheral that Western Humanism can represent itself at center. It is not the center that determines the periphery but the other way round where the periphery in its boundlessness determines the center.” One has to analyse the ideological framework in which women struggled, the experiential dimension of that struggle by recovering the subjective experience of women to capture women’s voice from the past and to present issues as they were perceived by women. The act of resistance by black women emerges as the defining point of a simultaneous

recovery of a space for language of race and women's question in its own terms. The performance represents what Gauthman defined as 'antipodal culture' which is the opposite of the hegemonic order and the aesthetic dimension is governed by the painful task of portraying the black woman's world which is filled with 'dreadful and humiliating events.' The texts of these oppressed women represent a culture where respatialisation of the centre and the margin happen with the articulation of marginality with interlocking oppressive social relations which calls for an understanding of literature based on what Martha Nussbaum calls "compassionate imagination" which results in not only acknowledging the excluded but also listening to their language.

4. CONCLUSION:

In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings* (1969) the author critiques the protagonist's admiration for white literary discourse. When Maya meets Bertha Flowers, Maya feels that "She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around." Although Maya begins to admire black female body, whiteness provides her standard of beauty. Ms. Bertha appealed to her as she was "like women in English novels who walked the moors with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance." This humorous passage demonstrates that Maya's self-perception remains dangerously regulated by white culture. Christine Froula maintains that Maya's feat of memory suggests the potential erasure of black female reality by white male literary discourse as she refers to Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* after her rape which indicates that Maya's propensity for the verbal and the literary leads her to ignore her own corporeality. The once mute Maya can borrow Lucrece's words but she must lend these words her own "looks" so that the equation of Lucrece's virtue and whiteness does not degrade her blackness. In remembering *The Rape of Lucrece*, Maya must also reconstruct and re-member her own body. When she seeks physical rather than verbal knowledge of her sexuality as Maya determines to have sex with "the most eligible young man in the neighbourhood" she reclaims her autonomy through the union of her body and will. Maya's naive seduction accentuates her feminist stance as she asks the young man "Would you like to have sexual intercourse with me?" Angelou accentuates Maya's reclamation of her body and volition by ironically alluding to the violation she suffered at the age of eight. In *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings*, three 'powhitetrash' girls ape the posture and singing of Maya's grandmother yet she emerges victorious from this degradation and calms the enraged Maya. In the grandmother's triumph over the white girls who caricature her body and in Maya's erasure of their footprints, Angelou refutes negative stereotypes about their bodies. In *Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance*, Manthia Diawara suggests that black women must break out from the claustrophobic prison so that they are not imprisoned by the images which enact a drama of their negation.

When Maya rakes away the girls' footprints and creates a new pattern "a large heart with lots of hearts growing smaller inside" it represents the bond between Maya and her grandmother and in macrocosm the celebration of black sisterhood which could reinstitute a gynocentric renaissance. Sistren's work in this context illustrates a radical revising of the English language in their use of 'patwah' and of literary forms such as drama and short stories that are based on ritual and folk form. Sistren was founded in 1977 when a group of twelve working class women employed as street cleaners under the Michael Manley government presented a drama titled *Downpression Get a Blow*. Patwah demonstrates the refusal of the people to imitate the coloniser, their insistence on creation, their movement from obedience towards revolution. Writing in dialect with its improvised spelling, the black women wrote a form of English that had been considered coarse and vulgar and by writing in a language that were used by illiterate people, the women broke silence delineating the potential for cultural resistance.

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