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The portrayal of black men and black women in selected works of selected black authors

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THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACK MEN
AND BLACK WOMEN IN SELECTED WORKS
OF SELECTED BLACK AUTHORS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BY
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ABSTRACT

POLITICAL SCIENCE

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THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACK MEN AND BLACK WOMEN IN SELECTED WORKS OF BLACK AUTHORS

Advisor: Dr. William H. Boone


Black male and female authors have been known to place black men and black women in stereotypical roles. Black male authors usually depict black women as weak and uneducated while black female authors illustrate black men to be users, abusers, drug addicts and uneducated individuals. The negative depictions are believed to have come about as a result of slavery. There has been strong criticism by black men and women in the way we depict each other in literature.

Eight books by black male and female authors have been selected in order to fairly review how they portray each other in their literature. The study's conclusion will determine whether each gender portrays the opposite gender in a derogatory manner.
The paper is dedicated to my parents, Alfred D. Wyatt, Sr. and Carolyn H. Wyatt; my grandparents, Frank H. Hill, Eloise Hill, the late John F. Wyatt, Sr., the late Lillie Bell Wyatt; brother and sister in law, Alfred Wyatt, Jr. and Carla W. Wyatt; and niece, Sharla Elaine Wyatt. Without the love and moral support of these special people this project could not have been successfully completed. Their moral support and dedication in helping me complete this project has meant more to me than words could ever explain. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Nathaniel Rowland, Genell Bolton, Danielle Butler, Vicki Kennedy, the Taylor family, Willie Belle Silas and a special friend Rudolph Silas, Jr. for their continuous support; and Mary Jones for her clerical assistance.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. JEALOUSY AND INSECURITY CAUSED BY INABILITY TO ACHIEVE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. BLACK MEN AS ABUSERS</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE BLACK FEMALE AS WEAK, UNEDUCATED SEXUAL OBJECT</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Portrayal of Black Men and Black Women in Selected Works of Selected Black Authors

Purpose of the Study. -- Black female and black male authors have been accused of stereotyping black characters in their writings. The purpose of this paper is to determine if such stereotyping indeed exist in the portrayals of men and women in black literature. The ideologies that are portrayed through characterizations are believed to have been based upon personal beliefs and experiences. The socialization process could contribute to beliefs.

Presently, there exists a controversy as to how black women writers portray black men. In the same vein, black male writers have been criticized for their portrayal of black women. If stereotypical attitudes and characterizations are subsequently found to be consistent in their portrayal, a conclusion will
be made as to whether the characterizations reflect the reality of black society or are inventions of black authors.

It has generally been conceptualized that black female writers in their works tend to portray the black male image as negative, while the black male does the same in his works in portraying black women. Black women have portrayed black men as uneducated, pimps, criminals and abusers. Black men have portrayed women as weak, prostitutes, dependent upon the black male, housewives and pregnant.

Methodology. -- In order to prove or disprove these assertions, there will be a critical examination of selected literary works by black female and male authors. Works by black females will focus upon their portrayals of black men, while works by black males will focus upon their images of the black woman. Each male's and female's role will be analyzed to determine if they are being portrayed in a stereotypical manner. An approach similar to that of authors Barbara Christian and Michele Wallace will be employed in


analyzing the literary works. These two authors discuss black men and women's roles historically. Christian analyzes historical roles and compared these roles with subsequent characterizations of blacks in their roles.

Thereafter, the portrayal of each character will be used to determine how each gender views itself politically and socially in society. This will be done by examining each character's role and way of life, and by discussing their general feelings about the life they lead. The main goal is to attempt to establish ways for blacks to feel better about themselves despite historical situations which have been responsible for the black society's condition.

Scope and Limitations. -- The scope of the literary works chosen will cover the years 1940-1983. The works will be limited to black men and women authors. The works chosen are believed to be representative of the black experience and are critically acclaimed works. Eight works were chosen to be a part of this particular study.
Historical Background. -- Generally, black women and men have shared a history of oppression, exploitation and victimization.³ This occurred because of slavery conditions. Black men worked in the fields and black women worked in the home and in the fields. Duties performed in the fields by black women were not considered as difficult as those performed by black men. However, the most important role of the black female centered around duties in the home.⁴ Black men and women were not given opportunities to educate themselves or obtain other skills.

As a result of historical happenings, images of black men and black women were created. "Images, especially created represent a certain way of focusing on the world outside, and therefore they represent a certain point of view."⁵ Black men came to view the lifestyle of the white man as success.⁶ An example of their attempt to emulate the white man was the black

⁴Christian, pp. 7-8.
man's desire to keep their wives out of the labor force. It was the responsibility of the white woman to take care of the home and the children, while her husband obtained work and provided for the family financially. Yet black men were unable to carry out the feat of sufficiently providing for their families because they did not receive education or training in other skills. White society looked at black men as being incapable of performing duties other than the menial type duties they performed during slavery.7

Unfortunately, negative images created during slavery have remained with the black society. Frustration and desperation to succeed has led many black men to turn to illegal activities for financial security.8 Many black women have remained in the home to please their husband, even though they have attained the necessary education to do better.9 Caretaker of the home and children subsequently came to be considered as the main duty of the black woman.

7Ibid., p. 51.
8Ibid., pp. 30-31.
9Ibid., pp. 157-162.
Accordingly, Black literature in America has been directly related to social response. The view of blacks about the black society at a particular time has been expressed in black literature. Black characters have been portrayed in roles that are dominant during the particular time period in which the work is written. In black literature, it has been contended that the black male and the black female have been given negative images.

In order to contradict society's negative image, black men have tried to maintain jobs to adequately support their families. Black men have argued that black women have continuously maintained a negative characterization of the black male in their literature. In the same vein, black women have consistently felt that black men have degraded black women in their characterizations. Unfortunately, the end result has been whites criticizing blacks and blacks criticizing blacks. In order to find a solution to the problem, pre-existing problems must be raised to help bring about a solution.

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Usually "... contemporary black women's fiction developed the thesis that black men, unwittingly or deliberately participate in the victimization of black women."\textsuperscript{12} It has been a general concensus among black women that they have been degraded by the black male. Most problems have tended to occur when the woman tried to achieve. The problem is more common in relationships and marriages. Frustration has usually developed when the black male cannot achieve to his greatest desire. When black men fail to accomplish their personal goals, frustration is usually released through violence upon their spouse: many times a black woman.\textsuperscript{13}

Often times, when a black male cannot achieve enough for his family, the black mother would try to obtain employment to help provide food and shelter for the family. Subsequently, the black woman feels a sense of independence which is expressed in her lack of reliance upon her husband for support.

However, because the black man has a need to possess some kind of power in his family, he has felt that it is his responsibility to be head of the

\textsuperscript{12}Gayles, p. 223.

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}
household. He tries to maintain employment to adequately support his family. Many times the male believes he is a failure and becomes jealous of his wife's accomplishments. Sometimes black men who cannot achieve have subsequently blamed their failure on the black woman. Consequently, the woman begins to feel responsible for her husband's failure. Many times the black woman has relinquished her job to morally support her husband; yet, her tactics are not always successful.\textsuperscript{14} The end result of this problem has generally been a vast amount of single parent homes and domestic arguments.

In effect, "women experience their deepest and most permanent scars with black men who shatter their dreams of love and acceptance."\textsuperscript{15} These scars usually developed during a relationship and remained after the relationship ended. However, "black men have understood that a woman's pain is real and deep, but they have not disengaged themselves from their own pain long enough to recognize the pain their women have suffered."\textsuperscript{16} Many times the pain the woman

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{14} Gayles, p. 228.
\bibitem{15} Ibid.
\bibitem{16} Ibid., p. 227.
\end{thebibliography}
experiences carries over into other relationships. The most permanent scar is that of mistrust.

Consequently, when black women authors have discussed black men in their literature, it was probably based upon their own personal observations. Black men have failed to realize that if black women have negatively characterized black men in their literature, these characterizations may be based upon personal experience and possess truth. However, black men have continuously complained about their images in black women's literature. Contrary to what men believe, it has been made clear that:

By and large black women writers do not write for money or recognition. They write for themselves as a means of maintaining emotional and intellectual clarity, of sustaining self development and instruction. Each writes because she is driven to do so, regardless of whether there is a publisher, an audience or neither.17

It is believed that when black women write about black men they have written from an emotional and personal standpoint. When they write about their experiences, there is no intention of receiving notariety or monetary gain. Their publications are a way of releasing emotional pain felt from relationships with black men. The life that women lead in itself should

17Ibid., p. 218.
explain their attitudes toward their portrayals of black men in literature.

As portrayed in the literature, there has been a perception by black women that the main problem with black men has consistently been their attitudes and betrayal of women. As a result, black women have tended to write negatively about black men in their literature. "A black woman's loyalty to her man is a recurring theme in novels; a theme that is the other side of the theme of racial bonding." The responsibility of marriage and relationship togetherness must come from its loyalty.

In an article written by Winston Moore, Moore criticizes black women and their attitudes toward black men. He blames some of the responsibility on black mothers and the way they rear their sons in becoming men. Moore claims that the woman often criticizes the black male and denounces him as inadequate. He states:

Over the years, this extreme criticism of the Black man by some black women only reinforces and exaggerates whatever inadequacies he may actually have. Thus, his mother's severe criticism of him during his childhood often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that he now is convinced that he is "never going to

18Wallace, Pt. I.

19Ibid., p. 228.
amount to anything" - just like his father - and, consequently performs inadequately on his job and in other areas. If the wife keeps up the criticism and passes on her own hostility toward her husband to her children, the pathological cycle is complete.20

Although there are many black men portrayed as victimizing women, the characterization is not always present.21 It is important that black men know that not all black men possess negative characteristics. Nevertheless, it is important that black men realize that victimization and abuse of black women is a common problem. Recognition of the problem could mean solutions.

In the same manner, the black woman's image in literature has been stereotyped. "The black woman as mammy was one of the most dominant images to emerge in southern life and literature, an image that has proved to be a most enduring one to the present."22 The mammy image of the black woman originated during slavery. During this time, the black woman was responsible for taking care of the house and the children; duties that were considered menial by black men.


22Christian, pp. 7-8.
As a result, black women have been held to jobs that are considered feminine and unmasculine. Black men hold the view or opinion that the woman should be responsible for taking care of the housework. Performing chores such as cooking, and ironing within the house are considered out of the ordinary for men. In fact, black men did not regard taking care of the household as work. Consequently, black men authors have maintained the image of the black woman as the "mammy type" in their literature. In fact, some black men have maintained the belief that the black woman's responsibility should be within the home. This belief is maintained despite the black woman's ability to pursue and achieve higher goals. It would be rare, if at all, that one would be able to find a black woman portrayed as a woman who has achieved. The question must arise as to whether black men actually want black woman to achieve.

In addition, the sexuality of the black woman has been abused since slavery. During slavery, black women were constantly raped and sexually abused by their white master. This caused tremendous jealousy and anger from the black man. His main problem was

23Christian, p. 10.
that there was nothing he could do about the situation. "The rape of black women by white men or the use of their bodies for pleasure could be rationalized as the natural craving of the black woman for sex rather than the licentiousness of the white man." Many times as a result of the rapes, black women bore their white master's children.

Subsequently, black men began to place the blame of the white master's actions on the black woman. Black men began to see black women as having no sexual modesty. They started using white women as a means of satisfying their sexual needs because of the degradation they felt from the black woman as a result of historical situations during slavery. The emotional weakness of the woman were considered a major prey to the black man. The black man would play on the emotional weaknesses of the black woman by displaying false emotions and using false words of love. If a black woman was known to have sex with men out of wedlock, she was considered loose. The loose black woman was one that inordinately craved sex. From this, black men began to characterize black women as prostitutes.

24Ibid., p. 13.
25Ibid.
Source of Materials and Tools of Research. -- The main sources to be used in the study will be literary works by black authors. They will include works by Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Michele Wallace, Le Roi Jones and James Baldwin. The works, *Color Purple* (1983); *Third Life Grange Copeland* (1970) - (Alice Walker); *Gather Together In My Name* (1974); *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) - (Maya Angelou); *The Motion of History* (1975); *Slave Ship* (1967) - (Le Roi Jones) *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) - (James Baldwin), and *Native Son* (1940) - (Richard Wright). These works were chosen because they are critically acclaimed and are representative views of the black experience.

Significance of the Study. -- The significance of the study is to determine how black authors characterize one another, and to determine if the images coincide with the ways that black society views itself. The outcome could lead to broader discussions that may help improve conditions for blacks socially and politically in society. Also, a determination will be made as to whether white society's opinions related to the inferiorities of the black race has been a significant influence in the way blacks view themselves.
CHAPTER II

JEALOUSY AND INSECURITY CAUSED
BY INABILITY TO ACHIEVE

Inability to achieve, jealousy and insecurity are three terms that may be used to describe the behavior of black men in their associations with black women. More often than not, black women have been able to pursue higher levels of education than black men, resulting in the black female's ability to obtain better employment. Better employment opportunities have meant that black females would, inevitably, make more money than the black male.

Therefore, as a result of historical conditions, black men have remained in menial positions. Although the percentage of black males pursuing higher education and better employment has increased, there has always been a significant number of black men who have not. In all of the fictional and non-fictional literature chosen, none of the black men are portrayed as intellectuals who pursue higher levels of education. Some did not because they chose not to do so.
Others could not because their families could not afford to send them or because the survival of the black household depended upon the black male working.

Traditionally, black males have been stereotyped as men who do not achieve. "One favorite image is that of the powerless old darky who hobbles through the pages of the works in which he appears seeking favors from his master or praising his goodness .... the powerlessness represents blacks in relation to the White population."¹ Black males have realized that white society has kept them from gaining power. They have subsequently turned to illegal activities for financial security. These roles have subsequently been cast as unacceptable in society. Yet, black men have continued to involve themselves in these activities because continuous efforts to find adequate employment have been unsuccessful. "The inferior role in which the black male has been cast -docile humble and irresponsible- is alleged to have compromised and severely damaged his masculinity."² As a result of inferior roles that have been cast upon them, and

¹Trudier Harris, Exorcising Blackness (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 29.

their inability to achieve, frustration has grown, yet he has continued to search for ways to achieve political and social power in society.

Generally, black women have received more education than black men. As a result, black women have had better opportunities to gain higher levels of employment despite many remaining in low paying positions or remaining unemployed. Their educational achievement has instilled jealousy in black men who have been unable to achieve. Black men display their jealousy by viewing the achievements of black women as interfering with their masculine role as head of the household. Their jealousy manifests through their degradation of black women and their desire to maintain control. A sense of achievement and power is felt when they succeed in degrading them or when they are able to control the actions of black women.

"Marital relationships based upon stereotypical views of men's and women's roles force deception and dependency which can lead to mistrust, low self esteem, isolation, jealousy, exclusive need for mates emotional gratification and finally a strong need to control and reassure self of partner's

3Wallace, p. 158.
exclusive loyalty."⁴ One problem within black families is desertion by the black male. Desertion most frequently takes place when the black male is not satisfied with his role within his household. Many times the male abandons the home because he does not feel he has satisfied his masculine role within his home.⁵ Desertion has been more common among black males who have a wife who is the sole supporter of the family:

The economic dependence of the black male on his wife makes him a weak figure. Her disappointment in him and his own frustration at his wife's having to support the family are likely to build to the point where he finds the situation intolerable and deserts.⁶

Black males have always had problems with the type of jobs they obtained. The black male not only deserts his family to rid himself of insecurity. Sometimes, he cheats on his wife or expresses false love to women in order to make himself feel adequate about his masculinity. Prodigious promiscuity is alleged to be a positive value among black males combined with a


⁵Taylor, Wilkinson, p. 2.

lively sense of sexual exploitation. Promiscuity and sexual exploitation by the black male is prominent in all of the works reviewed.

It has always been conveyed to black men that they will not be granted full humanity, and without granted humanity there is no social or political power. Because black men have a need for some kind of power, they develop tactics to be used on black women. These tactics make the black man feel a sense of control. In the past, the black male saw his role usurped at will when the white man entered the black woman's bed, and he was powerless to do anything about it. Now, with slavery at an end, the black man has regained control of his family. However, his image perceived by black women is negative: as so it is by the public. The public image of the black male coalesces around three interrelated postulates: 1) that the black male has been emasculated by white society; 2) that the emasculation process has prevented him from coming to full emotional maturity; and 3) as a result of these processes, the black male

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7Ibid., p. 3.
8Harris, p. 29.
9Ibid., p. 189.
tends to be a poor husband and father."\textsuperscript{10}

In Alice Walker's \textit{The Third Life of Grange Copeland}, the major black male characters were Grange Copeland and his son Brownfield. Grange was portrayed as a poor black man who could barely make ends meet for himself and his family. Although there was a desire to do better, he could not. He spent a large portion of his life working on a farm to pay debts he owed to its white owner. His frustrations and difficulties in life made him an undesirable father and role model to his wife and son.

Grange's son, Brownfield, was not given encouragement from his father to receive an education or told the importance of education by his father, freeing Brownfield from the type of life his father has led. Although appropriate values were not instilled in Brownfield's mind, he maintained a strong desire to be more than his father. As his life continued, he encountered many disappointments which he was not able to deal with. He subsequently ended up being the same type of family man to his wife and children as his father had been to him. His inability to achieve due to poor education and few skills led to circumstances that caused him to kill his wife, Mem.

\textsuperscript{10}Taylor, Wilkinson, p. 1.
Mem was a young, intelligent, well educated black female. Not long after their marriage, they started a family, and eventually had three children. The birth of the children brought about a greater need for money. It was Brownfield's desire to be the sole provider of his family. Yet, with few skills and no education, the only jobs that Brownfield could perform were those that required little skill and paid little money. Mem was always capable of gaining better employment but chose otherwise to preserve peace and harmony in her marriage.

Unfortunately, hard times occurred in the marriage of Mem and Brownfield. Brownfield became jealous of Mem and degraded her until she reduced herself to his level. One of the ways Brownfield got her to come down was by forcing her to speak broken English as he did. He also denied her the privilege of furthering her education and reading books in his home. Mem succumbed to living a life filled with poverty in order to keep her husband satisfied until one day she decides she can bear no more. By this time Brownfield had become extremely abusive, and in order to get Brownfield to give her permission to obtain employment, she held him at gunpoint.

After Mem gained successful employment she helped Brownfield find employment also. Because of
Mem, Brownfield and the rest of the family were able to live comfortably. Jealousy within Brownfield, caused him to scheme in order to force Mem into being unable to work:

...it was only Mem who looked less forward to a destructive and less inhuman future. He could not see beyond his emotion. He held himself back and, even when desperately for them there was a passion in them that often served as affection - still making babies, he planned ahead. Planting a seed to grow that would bring her down in weakness and dependence to her ultimate destruction.11

In effect, Brownfield succeeded in his plan. He previously held strong resistance in allowing Mem to work. He caused her so much injury that she had to quit her job and once again become dependent upon Brownfield for support. Instead of Mem working, Brownfield wanted to move his family into an old barn in the backyard of its white owner. He would do work on the land in exchange for pay and a place to live. When Mem finally has no other choice than to accept only what Brownfield could provide, Brownfield said:

"I done waited a long time for you to come down Missy, ... This is what I can afford and this is what you going to have to do with, See how you like me holding the upper hand."12


12 Ibid., p. 107.
In the same vein, "in the cool world, the ideal relationship (from the young man's point of view) between the sexes is achieved by the man who "pimps" a woman." In this type of relationship the woman supports the man. The size of a man's sexual organ has been considered a major part of his manhood and helped him to gain confidence in his sexuality. In the works read, there are several characters who use sex as a means of proving their masculinity.

First, Brownfield had affairs with other women in order to degrade his wife into feeling that she was not adequate. "Brownfield's actions can be cast in the vein of the "bad nigger" who attempts to show others what a man he is, illustrate what can happen to the black man who equates his manhood with his humanity." Brownfield consistently bragged about his affair with Josie to Mem. He consistently tells Mem how much better, sexually, Josie is.

Next, Grange also had sexual relations with Josie although he did not care for her at the time. "Grange allowed himself to be reduced to the level of bestiality identified with engaging in sexual

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13 Taylor, Wilkinson, p. 27.
14 Wallace, p. 98.
15 Harris, p. 39.
intercourse without caring for the partner; through this reduction he stripped himself of manhood by engaging in the very acts by which others had defined him. Grange eventually conquered the love of Josie and marries her, but upon the death of Mem, his youngest granddaughter, Ruth, conquers his love. Josie became jealous and eventually comes to terms with Brownfield, and they began to see each other again.

Likewise, in Walker's The Color Purple, black male characters are not portrayed as men who have been instilled with values of intellect and morality. The major black male characters in The Color Purple are Mister and Harpo. Mister shows no desire to achieve intellectually. His only desire is to gain sexual pleasure and control over his women. He only wanted a wife to take care of his home and his children.

Accordingly, Mister is a man who can be described as evil and trite. He bought Celie from her father. Celie and her sister Nettie had previously lived with their father. Both developed some reading and writing skills in school. Her sister, Nettie was believed to be the smartest. When Celie's father sold her to Mister, he kept Nettie for himself. Nettie eventually left her father and moved in with Celie and

16Ibid., p. 37.
Mister. Celie and Nettie knew that they would have to figure out a way to get away from Mister:

   Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away.17

Ultimately, Mister decided that Nettie could no longer live in his home. He informed Celie that Nettie must leave. Nettie and Celie promised to write each other, but Celie never heard from her sister.

Eventually, Celie discovered that Nettie has written her and that Mister has kept the letters from her. Celie gathered strength and determination to leave Mister with the help of Shug Avery, Mister's former lover. Before leaving, Celie asks Mister if there are more letters. His response is:

   If they did, he say I wouldn't give 'em to you. You two of a kind he say. A man try to be nice to you, you fly in his face.... Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.18

Like Mister, Harpo has his own idea of being a successful black man. He obtained his idea from his father Mister, who had controlled his wife, Celie, since she and his father had been married. When Harpo married Sofia, he wanted to control her as his father


18Ibid., p. 186-187.
controlled Celie. However, Sofia was a strong independent woman. In Sofia's and Harpo's relationship, Sofia was the stronger of the two. Harpo was dissatisfied and perplexed in not being able to control Sofia in the fashion his father controlled Celie:

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Albert. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk.\(^{19}\)

Harpo continued his effort to gain control, but when he could not, he became frustrated. One day Celie found him crying outside on her doorstep:

What happen to your eyes? I ask. ...Sofia he say ... She my wife he say ... I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa. Oh, Lord, I say. When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you.\(^{20}\)

Thus the character of Harpo conforms to the insecure black male: a male who feels he must control "his woman."

Although black male characters in the works of Maya Angelou are portrayed differently from black men in the works of Alice Walker, the characterizations are still considered unsuccessful. Angelou's \(\text{I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings}\) and \(\text{Gather Together In My Name}\)

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 42.

\(^{20}\)Ibid., p. 65.
are autobiographical accounts. Her accounts include her involvement with various men throughout different years in her life. Although there are few major black male characters, there are several males involved in Angelou's life. However, her brother Bailey can be termed somewhat successful in that he takes certain steps to be considered an acceptable man in accordance with white society's definition. Other characters include her father, who like fathers in Walker's works, are not considered adequate role models for their sons, and her uncle Willie, who because of his handicap, can do no more than work in the family store. In Angelou's *Caged Bird*, Angelou was raped by her mother's live-in boyfriend. Not only does he rape her, but he also threatened Angelou's family to keep her from telling anyone. Black males who commit these type of acts in order to feel domineering and in control are in need of help. Yet, many black men feel that if they seek help they are less than a man.21

In *Gather Together*, Angelou meets men who are users, gamblers, and drug addicts. These men spur her determination and need to be a strong individual. Yet, these men's disastrous or unfaithful lives cause

21Harris, p. 167.
turmoil in Angelou's life as well. Charles, Angelou's first love, was characterized as a user. His profession was unknown. He felt a sense of achievement in his ability to con women into thinking he truly loved them. R. L., another black male can be classified as a user also. R. L. used Angelou in his dance act as his dance partner; Angelou may have used him as well. He taught her to dance, and he furnished her with outfits to wear for performances. He made sexual advances toward her and she carried them out; because she felt he was her ticket to success:

I was getting so I could fairly fly through the routine. My romance with R. L. was danced out in the rehearsal hall, because he made few sexual demands. I gave no arguments to his monthly requests for lovemaking. After all, he was my teacher and my transportation to Broadway.22

Yet, when R. L.'s former dance partner returned, he immediately released Angelou and continued his pursuit to be a successful dancer. Angelou was just a convenient person for him to use at the time. He used her for his own success and sexual pleasure.

Another character, L. D., appeared later in Angelou's life. L. D. appeared to be a successful man, but his profession was also unknown. He showered her

with gifts, and kind words of love and affection. He promised to marry her and provide a happy home for her and her son. However, L. D. runs into financial trouble. Because Angelou felt he loved her, she turns to prostitution to help him financially. Suddenly, an emergency comes about and Angelou has to leave immediately. When she returned two or three weeks later, she has to search for L. D.'s whereabouts. When she eventually finds him, she realizes that not only was he married, but that he is her pimp and a gambler.

Additionally, there are several characters in Angelou's Gather Together that used women for sexual gratification. First, there was Maya's first love Charles, who gained sincere affection and sexual pleasure from Maya. He told Maya of his girlfriend only upon her return to town.

After L. D., Angelou met Troubador Martin. Angelou sold clothes for Troubador. Although she felt Troubador had no interest in her, she constantly accepted expensive clothing from him as gifts. She eventually became infatuated with Troubador because of his kindness and generosity and asked his committal to a serious relationship. Troubador refused; Angelou was devastated. When he failed to give her an adequate reason as to why he did not "want" her, Angelou no longer wanted to work for him. Eventually, Troubador
decided to show her his way of life. He takes her to the apartment where he lives. The apartment is filled with drugs and drug addicts. Troubadour explains to Angelou that he does not want her to be a part of that kind of life. Afterwards, Angelou returns home to her mother. These non-fictional male characters in Angelou's work parallel the fictional male characters invented by Walker: that is, users of women and generally jobless.

Similarly in Walker's Third Life, Grange Copleland deserts his family. He did so because he cannot handle the debts he owed to his white boss. Grange, a farmer, was not pleased with the life he provided for himself and his family. He always heard from other members of his family that the north is the place to live to be successful. Because of the shame and depression he felt in his life, Grange neglects his son, Brownfield, and abuses his wife Margaret. Margaret, who is frustrated with Grange, sleeps with other men and eventually bears an illegitimate albino son. After Grange deserted his family, his wife and her illegitimate son die of poison. Brownfield, who is sixteen at the time, wanted to make more of his life. He refused to accept a job that will make his life indebted to the white man as did his father. The effects of his father's desertion instill in him
determination not to be like him. Yet, he would eventually become the same.

Also, in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya and her brother Bailey are deserted by both their mother and their father. However, when their grandmother feels that Stamps, Arkansas was no longer an appropriate place for them to live, she requests their parents come and take them away. It is Maya's and Bailey's father who came to pick them up. Only Bailey, who has no feasible male model was excited about his father's return. Her father only appeared for a brief period; he picked them up and returned them to their mother. He is never heard from again.

In effect, in families where the male is not present, the identifying role for the young black male is missing and no appropriate model is present.\textsuperscript{23} Grange is Brownfield's role model. Brownfield realizes from Grange's actions that his desertion of the family results from his inability to carry out his role as head of the household. "The inability to function successfully in the male role it is claimed may be experienced as a loss in masculinity and social identity, which he may attempt to recoup by active involvement in the life of the streets, or by leaving

\textsuperscript{23}Taylor, Wilkinson, p. 33.
the household unit."\textsuperscript{24} It is strongly felt that Grange's inability to function successfully lead him to desert his family. His untimely return, and subsequent attachment and raising of Brownfield's younger daughter result from guilty feelings. Brownfield, who is very much aware of the reason for his father's generosity toward his granddaughter plans revenge to make up for what his father did to him.

Walker expresses her views on black men through her systematic negative characterizations. In Walker's works, black men are portrayed seeing the black female as a sexual object. Black males are characterized further as abusers and alcoholics. The black male never achieves and is always responsible for the unfavorable living conditions of the family. He is responsible for the degradation of black women. She portrays him as frustrated and jealous of what black women have achieved. None of the black men are portrayed as achievers or proper role models for the younger black men in society.

Likewise, in Angelou's works, black men are portrayed as pimps, using women as sexual objects, and drug addicts. As father, the black male is considered inadequate, and is basically nonexistent in Angelou's

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 2.
works. Males are weak figures. Those considered successful are involved in illegal activities.

Still and all, the portrayal of black men in Angelou's and Walker's works are very similar. Yet there is a major difference in the way the works were written. While Walker's works are written from creativity and imagination, Angelou's works are based upon a reality that has taken place in her own personal life.
CHAPTER III

BLACK MEN AS ABUSERS

Many times when black men cannot overcome their insecurities and jealousies of the black woman, they tend to resort to physical and mental abuse. Physical abuse involves striking or harming by direct contact. Mental abuse consists of playing on the emotions of the female. There is no direct contact in mental abuse, yet the effects are basically the same. With mental abuse, harsh language is used to make the female feel she is less of an individual. The result usually involves the female lowering herself or becoming something that she is not to satisfy her male counterpart.

Generally, there have been various reasons as to why black men have abused black women. Although the majority of abuse has occurred in marital relationships, abuse may begin during the dating period. Black men and black women have given different reasons for the abuse of black females. Some men believed that
black women have brought it upon themselves,\textsuperscript{1} while black women have tended to feel that they have been abused by black men because of their insecurities. Yet, there are some women who have felt that they are not being mistreated when their husbands abuse them. These women feel they deserve the abuse or that their husband's action was an indication of his love for her.\textsuperscript{2}

Additionally, support groups have been formed to help women who have been battered by their husbands. It has provided emotional support for women and their children who otherwise would have had no place to turn. One emotional support group for black women is known as Battered Minority Women.

Battered Minority Women defined battering as the systematic deprivation inflicted upon third world men by society which in turn, is inflicted upon third world women. That is, black women are beaten solely because their men are deprived.\textsuperscript{3} Although this may or may not be true, the Battered Minority Women's group

\textsuperscript{1}Wallace, p. 32.


\textsuperscript{3}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 40.
has appeared to place the reason for abuse by black men as resulting from the oppression from white society.

The group has been built upon:

1. A history of being physically battered by men in their home.
2. The experience of having survived the trauma of a lifetime of poverty and
3. A strong allegiance to various third world community groups.

Beth Richie, the author of the article that describes the Battered Minority Womens group found the reasoning in justification of black males abuse upon black women to be disturbing. She states that:

This well-popularized myth suggests the notion of the "strong black woman," willing and able to accept beating in support of her man. The implication is that the role of black women in our families is to receive regular whippings in order to alleviate black men's stress. Clearly, this is a dangerous portrayal. Undoubtedly, the stress black men must endure is cruel and often overwhelming. The connection this has to black women accepting beatings puzzles me. Who is responsible? And where is the strength in acceptance? It is true that black women have historically been able to secure employment at times when black men could not. Does this make us any less oppressed? Why are we arguing whose oppression is worse?

Richie's message to black women who feel that they have been beaten because of oppression should not justify

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4Ibid., p. 41.
5Ibid., p. 42.
the black male's abuse. Black women as well as black men have been historically oppressed in our society. To justify the abuse would not help to solve the problem, but only to enhance it.

On the other hand, as stated earlier, there are those who believe that jealousies and insecurities of black men toward black women have resulted in abuse. More often than not, the black male abuses the female physically. Society has provided males with roles that are aggressive and authoritative. When black men fail to attain aggressive and authoritative roles in the working force, they feel a desire to attain a role that makes them feel more masculine. "One message received by young Black males is "to become a man means that you must become dominant, aggressive, decisive, responsible, and in some instances violent in social encounters with others." If these qualities are not a part of you, then you are not considered a true male.

"Collectively, the young black male may express his displeasure through negative aggression, which

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allows him to obtain some feeling of control, if not a false sense of superiority, by behaving in a manner that brought attention to his need to be identified as an individual as well as a member of a formal or informal group. The negative aggression has usually included physical force along with pain and scars. The woman's failure to disapprove of the violent acts has caused the black male to realize that the female has accepted what he is doing to her. Consequently, the act becomes more and more prominent, and the female's respect for herself and her mate diminish with rapidity.

Similarly, "violence may be related to the man's jealousy or dependence on the woman." Jealousy or dependence upon the woman has usually tended to cause frustration in the male, especially the black male. This jealousy comes about because the black male believes the male should be the sole provider for himself and his family. "It has been suggested that batterers resort to violent acts as a way of competing with women's superior abilities." His acts make him

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9White, p. 15.

10Walker, p. 16.
achieve in the home which is what he has not been able to achieve in the white society. Evelyn White states that:

The average black man frequently struggles to provide his family with basic necessities... The black man may decide that if nothing else, he will at least control what happens in his home and within his family. He may behave abusively because, like most men, he has not learned how to express his pain, frustration, lack of confidence and insecurity about his impotence in the world. But abusing those he loves only make him feel worse, not better about himself. For he has confirmed the racist stereotype about the violent nature of black men.\(^1\)

Accordingly, such is the case with the character Brownfield in Walker's *Third Life*. Brownfield physically abused his wife because he could not achieve and compete with his wife. To compensate for what he could not achieve, Brownfield physically abuses his wife to bring her down to his level.

His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from school teaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write... It was his rage at himself, and his life and his world that made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers, although she was no party to any of it.\(^2\)

His main objective in abusing Mem was to destroy all she had accomplished. If she did not speak the way he

\(^{11}\)White, pp. 24-25.

wanted her to, he would beat her.

As the marriage continued, conditions for Mem
did not improve; nor did the abuse she took from
Brownfield diminish. However, she possessed a
determination which allowed her to continue to survive
with Brownfield, and to push more for herself and her
three daughters. One thing that she wanted more was a
house of her own. She knew that in order for her to
get it she would have to buy it herself. Brownfield
always opposed Mem's search for a house. He knew that
he could not purchase one with the type of work that he
did. He had never been able to find a decent home for
his family. Yet, he never thought Mem to be able to do
better than himself.

However, Mem surprised Brownfield one day and
informed him that she had purchased a home. In the
meantime, Brownfield found work on a white man's farm,
which would have provided less than adequate housing
for him and his family to live. When Mem informed
Brownfield of the house she has purchased, he is
furious because he could not do it himself. He became
even more determined to move his family into the
undesirable home that he had chosen. Yet Mem was more
determined to move into the house she had chosen.

Brownfield responds:
We moving exactly when and where I say we moving. Long as I'm supporting this family we go where I says go.\textsuperscript{13}

Brownfield is not able to win his battle with Mem. He is "coerced" at gunpoint to move into the house Mem has chosen, after he beats her brutally.

After moving into the house, Brownfield viciously plots to abuse his wife to a point where she can no longer work and survive on her support alone. He thought:

... he planned ahead. Planting a seed to grow that would bring her down in weakness and dependence and to her ultimate destruction.\textsuperscript{14}

He forced Mem to get pregnant twice. Both times she miscarried. The effects of the miscarriages took a tremendous toll on her health, until she can no longer work. Brownfield saw his plan succeeding:

All of her confidence wore away with her health as Brownfield watched, gloating and waiting. She could not believe he had planned it... And then there came the day when she could not even get out of bed to look for work.\textsuperscript{15}

Eventually, the house was lost and Mem was forced to live in poverty on Brownfield's support: the only kind of life that Brownfield could give her.

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 104.
Nevertheless, the "marriage" of Brownfield and Mem continues. The abuse from Brownfield continued, along with drunkenness and disloyalty. When Brownfield got drunk, he often became violent. One night, his drunkenness caused him to be more violent than usual. At the time, only Brownfield and his three daughters were at home. The daughters developed tremendous fear, and left the house to forewarn Mem before she returned. The oldest daughter did not succeed in finding Mem before her return. As Mem opened the house door, Brownfield shoots her in the head, killing her.

Likewise, in Walker's Color Purple there is also abuse suffered by women from their husbands. As stated earlier, in the relationship of Harpo and Sofia, Harpo could not control his wife like his father could control his wife, Celie. His frustration led him to depression and a strong desire to gain control. Celie told Harpo he could only gain control by beating her. Harpo responded by striking Sofia. However, Sofia did not succumb to the abuse of Harpo. Instead, she responded by fighting back:

They fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they got is turned over... They fight. He try to slap her....She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes. He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come up... She never blink a eye. He jump up to put a
hammer lock under her chin. She throw him over her back.16

Also, Mister abuses Celie to prove his masculinity. Mister not only abuses Celie physically, but her sexually as well. Usually, when Mister performs sexually with Celie there is no feeling. Celie appears to get no satisfaction out of his performance either. She knows that Mister has no feelings for her, and that he is sleeping with other women. One night while Mister is performing sexually with Celie, she thinks:

I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe. And then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him.17

She knows that what Mister did was not out of love for the simple fact that he would do the same to someone else.

As previously stated Mister abuses Celie physically. It is Mister who gives Harpo the notion that women should do what their husband requests. If she does not, it is up to the husband to beat her to put her in her place. Celie is constantly beaten by Mister. Sometimes she is beaten because she does not do what she is told. Other times she is just beaten:

16Alice Walker, The Color Purple, p. 44.

17Ibid., p. 21.
He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.18

When Harpo later asked his father why he beats Celie his response is because she was his wife. He also starts a statement that indicated that all women were good for was for sexual pleasure.19

In the same vein, men can also abuse women without abusing them physically or sexually. Women can also be abused mentally. When a woman is mentally abused by a man it is done when the man speaks to her in a degrading manner. She eventually believes that she is actually a depiction of what he described. She begins to think less of herself, and many times feels that she is worthless. When the black male seesthis, he continues his degradation to maintain his control.

Brownfield's character is indicative of these type characteristics. He speaks to his wife, in a demeaning way. He constantly refers to her as ugly:

18Ibid., p. 30.
19Ibid., p. 40.
"When the time comes, you'll see what you do, Miss Ugly," he said and pinched her worn tense cheek.\textsuperscript{20}

Brownfield talks to Mem in this type manner so much that she eventually began to think of herself as an ugly woman.

Moreover, not only does he degrade her because of her looks, but also because she talks fluently. Brownfield does not accept Mem's superior knowledge. He feels her superior knowledge shows when she talks. So, he begins to criticize her: He says

"Why don't you talk like the rest of us poor niggers?" he said to her. "Why do you always have to be so damn proper? Whether I says "is" or "ain't" ain't no damn humping off your butt.\textsuperscript{21}

Mem eventually begins to speak in a manner that Brownfield wishes her to speak.

In \textit{The Color Purple}, Celie is mentally abused to believe that it is acceptable for her to be beaten. It is considered acceptable to gain respect in this manner. Since Celie's childhood, she had constantly been beaten by men: her father and her husband. She considered herself ugly because she hears it from others and she fails to give herself credit for her

\textsuperscript{20}Alice Walker, \textit{The Third Life of Grange Copeland}, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 56.
intelligence. It is only with the help of Shug Avery that Celie realized she possessed more than she has given herself credit.

Finally, men have mentally abused their wives when they have had affairs with other women. If a woman becomes aware of her husband's infidelity, she begins to think that she is responsible for his actions. Infidelity occurs in the relationship of Brownfield and Mem, Celie and Albert and Grange and Margaret. In all cases, the women are made to feel as they were unsatisfying to her husband. In the relationship of Brownfield and Mem, Brownfield tells Mem that Josie was better than she would ever be.\textsuperscript{22} In the marriage of Grange and Margaret, Margaret has other affairs. However, these women remain with their husbands until they are deserted, killed or can take no more. The damage is irreparable. Their image of black men is at its lowest.

In the works of Alice Walker, black men are systematically portrayed negatively. Black men are responsible for the degradation of black women, and are almost always characterized as abusers. None of the black men characterized in the works are achievers.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 107.
All are failures as husband, provider and role model. The systematic negative portrayal of black men by Walker implies her own views in the relationship of black men and women. Her characterizations express her view that black men are irresponsible and the major source of failing marriages and achievements in black families.

In the works of Angelou and Walker, men are characterized as abusers, sexual users, alcoholics. Some also have strong feelings of insecurity toward women. Although Walker's works are written creatively, her works portray feelings and views of men that always appear to have existed in reality. More weight is added to the views expressed by Walker in the works of Maya Angelou, where situations portrayed are based on reality.
CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK FEMALE AS WEAK,
UNEDEDUCATED, SEXUAL OBJECT

Black male authors tend to portray black women as weak, uneducated sexual objects. The portrayal stems from the mammy and the motherly image that has been a part of black women since slavery. During slavery, black women were used as sexual objects by their white slave master. Her black husband, filled with pain because of his inability to control his master's actions, eventually comes to view her as a sexual object. Despite achievements by black women the traditional images of mother and sexual immodesty remain. Black women continuously support black men even though they fail to make significant achievements.

Historically, "the images in southern antebellum literature that developed as stereotypes of black woman reveal much, not only about the southern attitude toward black people but also about their
definition of woman."¹ The black woman is not only responsible for taking care of her own children, but her master's children as well. She works in the fields as well as in the home. Much of her work was regarded as feminine.² The chores that she performs within the home are done solely by her. Cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children are some of the tasks she performs. Her responsibility in taking care of the children brings about her characterization as mother. "The care of children and the home were assigned mainly to females - either mothers, grandmothers, neighborhood women or female children."³

Thereafter, the role of mother has become an important role associated with black women. "The institution of motherhood was based on the sexist assumption that women have maternal instincts rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self realization, relation to others rather than interest in self."⁴ This means that motherly characteristics of women are considered to be a natural part of her, and not something she has developed as an individual. The

¹Gayles, p. 18.
²Ibid., p. 58.
³Ibid., p. 58.
⁴Ibid.
love, care, and nurture from the black woman is not looked upon as a very important responsibility, but only a natural instinct. Considered a natural instinct, instead of work or talent, the black mother is rarely praised for her tasks. "The work entailed by a mother was neither recognized or recompensed, for what a woman did as wife or mother in her own home was considered a labor of love, was not defined as work by the society and was not done for direct wages."\(^5\)

Subsequently, black men regard motherhood as one of the most important roles for black women. It is common for black men to portray black women as motherly characters. However, within his portrayals, the black male author always portrays black women as failures in what is considered her most important role. He blames mistakes by the child or unworthy actions of the child as the responsibility of the mother.

Unfortunately, the black woman's role in slavery is regarded as a major factor in her failure to gain higher status in society. In many ways the black woman's plight in slavery was worse than the black man's; not because she fought against a traditional

\(^5\)Ibid.
woman's role, but because she willingly assumed it.\textsuperscript{6} Her assumed role has resulted in dependency upon the black male. This dependency has caused her to accept her position in society rather than nourishing her abilities to gain more. Cooking and cleaning have many times been considered the woman's best talents. If she gets a job it is usually as a maid for white families. "The acquisition of power or wealth demanded such specialization that work in the home was necessarily left to women."\textsuperscript{7}

Many times black women have elected not to work in order to please their husbands. "To emphasize the maleness of the perfect patriarch, the wife was expected to be submissive, weak and dependent."\textsuperscript{8} This helps the black male feel more powerful and worthwhile in his marriage. It also facilitates his need to feel useful in his family. The dependency of black women on black men for financial support and love has made her an even weaker individual.

Besides their motherly role and their role portraying their dependency upon the black male, black

\textsuperscript{6}Wallace, p. 200.

\textsuperscript{7}Christian, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid.
women have been used as sexual objects in the works of black male authors. "Like the mammy, the loose black woman image demonstrates how complicated stereotypes can be."9 When black men stereotype black women in sexual roles, they have done so in a degrading manner. However, they do not fault themselves for gaining sexual pleasure from these women. When men perform with women sexually, they believe they are giving women something that they want.10 On the other hand, the writer feels that when women perform with men, they are giving the man what he wants.

Still and all, society has never degraded black men for their sexual irresponsibilities as they have the black woman. The reason could possibly stem from slavery when black women were forced to sleep with and bear children for their white masters. Black women have also been looked upon as sexual objects by white men. This view has more than likely resulted from conditions during slavery. "The black woman is aware that the white man believes that all black women are great sexual animals who cannot only satisfy him better than any white woman, but also can release him from

9Christian, p. 10.
10Gayles, p. 190.
whatever complexes that may be repressing his sexuality.\footnote{Jay David and Mel Watkins (eds.) To Be A Black Woman, (New York: William Morrow, Inc. 1970), p. 37.} This view has apparently come into play with black men as well. However, the black male's view has become a part of society, but it has come into play as a matter of convenience for him.

Conversely, black women do not like being seen as sexual objects.\footnote{Gayles, p. 195.} As stated earlier, many black women perform sexually with black men to please them. "If a black woman fails to comply with the black man's wishes, the black man has numerous other options including not only other black women, but also women of other races.\footnote{Christian, p. 142.} During the late sixties and early seventies, the issue was to be a common problem among black women. Black women felt that black men have betrayed the black race by depriving them of the love and affection they were giving to white women.\footnote{Wallace, p. 29.} The betrayal was to be felt most because of the degradation that the black society had been through as a result of white society.
Another portrayal that is common in works of black men is uneducated women. "There are no professional black women who are active participants in the outside world."¹⁵ For these reasons, black women have maintained roles that require little or no skill at all. "The focus of the writer is on non professionals, a focus that lends support to Claudia Tate's opinion that black women writers are concerned with a kind of folk heroine and have not, as yet, dealt with the college educated black woman, who is, by fact of her education, encountering all kinds of additional problems."¹⁶ Instead we find men in professional roles, and the woman is left at home to care for his children. LeRoi Jones believes that women should never be equal with men, and that the black woman must give inspiration to men and also be responsible for educating their children.¹⁷ Those black men who carry on this belief have tried to assimilate the white man.

First in James Baldwin's If Beale Street Could Talk, two women are characterized. One is the mother of Tish, a young girl who is pregnant by her boyfriend.

¹⁵ Gayles, p. 228.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Brown, p. 158.
The other mother is Fonny's mother Sharon. Fonny is the boyfriend of Tish and the father of her baby. Both Tish's mother and Sharon are portrayed as mothers who are considered unsuccessful because of the actions of their children. The women in If Beale are consistently free of the guilt earlier black women would have felt for their actions. In Tish's mother, failure in motherhood is portrayed in her acceptance of her daughter's pregnancy, without her being married to the father of her baby. Most mothers who have daughters who are victims of teenage pregnancy have guilty feelings about what their daughters have done. Many times the mother feels she is somehow responsible for the irresponsible act of her daughter. Yet, in If Beale, Tish's mother has no guilty feelings about the pregnancy of her daughter. "Tish has nothing to fear from her mother and nothing to feel guilty about for the actions she has committed." However, her mother's support makes her mistake easier to handle.

Additionally, Fonny's mother, Sharon is also portrayed as an unsuccessful mother. Sharon is


19Ibid., p. 148.
portrayed as a woman who has strong religious beliefs, but her actions contradict those of a religious individual. Most women in Baldwin's novels have strong religious beliefs, but his portrayal of the women negate the Christian teachings of the church. For example, Sharon abandoned her son while he was in jail. She feels he is a failure. During his incarceration, she offers him no moral support, despite his insistence that he has been falsely accused of the crime. After she abandons him, she leaves it to Tish's family and her husband to prove her son's innocence.

Likewise, in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the mother of the main character, Bigger Thomas is characterized as an unsuccessful mother. Wright expresses Bigger's mother's failure in the irresponsibilities and mishaps in the life of Bigger. The kind of life provided for him by his mother is expressed as one of the reasons why Bigger turned out to be the type of individual that he was. Even though Bigger's mother could not adequately provide for her family, she tries to instill values in her children. There was no role model for Bigger. His mother was considered his sole provider and means of support. Although unsuccessful, she did what she could to help her son. The actions of Bigger appear as though she has failed in raising her son.
Nevertheless, Bigger had a will to do what he wanted. Although he does not carry out a robbery, he had plans to rob a store. The robbery was to have taken place if he did not get a job as a chauffeur. During his first night as a chauffeur, Bigger murders his employer's daughter. Later, he would murder his girlfriend.

Additionally, Le Roi Jones gives women motherly roles in his work *Slave Ship*. The female characters in *Slave Ship* are minor and insignificant. Their only purpose is to serve as caretakers for their small children. Jones generally believes the black woman is the black man's divine compliment.\(^{20}\) For this reason, the female character has not played a significant role in Jones' works.

Similarly, women are looked upon as sexual objects. In being considered a sexual object the female bears the children of her husband. Their specific purpose appears to be to raise their children. The financial support of the mother and her children is solely dependent upon the husband. For instance, in *If Beale*, one of Tish's only purposes is to have Fonny's child. Also, the life of Tish's and

Fonny's mothers solely consist of them raising their children.

Contrastingly, in *Native Son*, the females sexuality is shown more explicitly in the relationship of Bigger and Bessie. After Bigger realizes that he may be caught for the accidental murder of his employer's daughter, he immediately goes to Bessie and orders her to come with him. During their flight, Bigger and Bessie are able to find refuge in an old abandoned building. While in the building, a strong desire for Bessie comes over Bigger. Despite Bessie's objections, Bigger performs sexually with her. Shortly after the act, Bigger kills Bessie as she sleeps. He later reveals that he does not love Bessie: that she is only his girl. By stating that Bessie is only his girl, Bigger implied that Bessie is only used for his sexual desires. Yet Bessie possesses a true love for him.

In addition to the motherly role and sexual object, the women in the works are considered weak. In Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger is depended upon by his mother and Bessie. Bigger's mother hardly has enough for herself and her three children to survive. Her inability to make enough causes her to place pressure on Bigger to bring in additional income into the family. It was only upon Bigger obtaining employment
that she was able to feel comfortable about her family's adequate survival. Wright makes the reader feel that without Bigger, his mother will not make it. At the end of the novel the reader is left with the question of Bigger's mother's survival after Bigger's conviction of murder and his doom to execution. The dependency of Bigger's mother on him for financial support allows her to be classified as a weak black female.

In the same vein, Bigger's girlfriend Bessie is portrayed as a weak female. Although Bessie does work, she has a strong dependency for emotional support from Bigger. Her emotional weakness eventually leads to her downfall. Out of love for Bigger, Bessie stays with him despite knowing that he has committed murder. Even though she is terrified when she becomes aware of what he has done. She flees with him because he convinces her that she is an accessory to the crime by helping create a fake ransom note. The ransom note is created in order to receive a large sum of money. The money gained from the ransom is for Bigger's survival after his escape. Bessie serves no other purpose but to help Bigger. Her failure to refuse to flee with Bigger eventually leads to her death.

Furthermore, in Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Tish's mother and Sharon can be considered weak
because of decisions they made. Sharon is considered weak because she depended upon her husband for survival. Tish's mother, like Sharon, was also dependent on her husband for financial support, however, she could appropriately be considered the weaker of the two because of what she did for the men. In this particular work, Tish's mother goes to Puerto Rico to help Fonny and his lawyer prove their case against a Puerto Rican woman who has accused Fonny of raping her. She got no monetary reward; in fact, she only appeared to do it in order to help her daughter. Tish could not marry Fonny unless he was released from jail. "The black woman is both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by the others for their own ends." 21 At the end of the novel, Fonny was released.

Other men were in jobs that required skills that employed them well enough to satisfactorily support their family. No women in the works had significant roles in society except for Le Roi Jones, Motion of History. Motion of History involves black characters expressing their concern for the situation

of blacks in society. The role of the characters are based upon blacks who had contributed to black society by fighting to improve its condition. The only important female included within the work was Harriett Tubman. The only other woman portrayed characterized the woman as loose, uneducated alcoholic gambler.

Finally, despite women's treatment by men in their works, the black female has continuously supported the black male. Their supportive role can be found in the works of men and women as well. Many women in Baldwin's works want to become more active and to help, but none can do much more than offer support. This is true for Tish and her mother in *If Beale*. In *Native Son*, Bigger's mother supports him after he has been accused of rape and murder. In spite of knowing his guilt, she begs the white victim's family for forgiveness. She does this despite all the trouble he has caused her.
In conclusion, black men and women authors have consistently portrayed each other negatively. Black women continuously characterize black males as men who cannot achieve. Black men characterize black women in the same role. However, scientific literature states that the inability of the black man to achieve is partly responsible for hostility and violence in his marriage or relationship. Many times he abuses his wife because of his failures. If his wife achieves more, he becomes jealous and insecure about his masculine role. It appears important for the black man to maintain control of his wife. He also gains confidence in himself through his ability to gain sexual gratification from women.

On the other hand, black men characterize themselves as achievers, but portray the black woman as an uneducated black mother, whose success as a mother is measured by her children. Black male authors seldom portray black women in roles other than that of a
mother, totally dependent upon the black male for her financial support. The black woman's role in the works of black men are minor and insignificant. Most black women, in their roles as mother are considered unsuccessful.

In the works of Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, black men are portrayed negatively. In Walker's works, black men are portrayed as sexual users, abusers and individuals with a strong need to feel masculine and a sense of control. Most of their actions are brought about through a strong desire to feel masculine. In Angelou's works, black men were portrayed as sexual users and abusers also. They are also characterized as drug addicts and deserters. Angelou's works lead the author to believe that the characterizations of black men are a part of Angelou's reality because her works were autobiographical. Her non-fictional black male characters are consistent with black male characters fictionalized in Walker's works.

Continuing, in the works of Baldwin, Jones and Wright, black women are portrayed as unsuccessful mothers. In the works of Baldwin and Wright, the success of the mother is determined by the actions of her children. In both works, the children's actions make the mother appear unsuccessful. In Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger's mother was judged unsuccessful
because Bigger murders two people. Bigger's trouble as a child is traced to the life provided for him by his mother.

Similarly, in Baldwin's *If Beale*, the mothers are considered unsuccessful because of the actions of their children. Tish's mother is not considered successful because she becomes a victim of teenage pregnancy. Fonny's mother is considered unsuccessful because Fonny is incarcerated for rape. She is also portrayed as a woman who considers religion an important part of her life; yet even her personality differs from that of a religious individual.

In the works of Jones, the women are considered insignificant and basically had no role at all. Jones' failure to include women in significant roles, imply his own view of the importance of women to him in our society. The roles of black women in all of the works of black male authors show their view of women. Still and all, both black men and black women authors are prejudicial in their characterizations.

Black men and black women have suffered from the after effects of slavery. The effects have caused each gender to have stereotypical images of the other. Black women have consistently pictured men in certain ways and have cast them in particular types of roles. In the same vein, black men have cast women in certain
roles also. The roles of blacks appear, in my view, to be portrayed in ways that have traditionally been a part of them. Black society's lack of ability to improve the problems among themselves has caused problems to remain. Consequently, white society's images of black men and women have remained dominant.

Slavery has been responsible for the problems of the black society. It was during this time that stereotypical roles were created and associated with them. White society destroyed the trust, dignity and integrity of the black race. The negative effects have remained a part of our society today.

The sexual intrusion of white masters has played upon the consciousness of black men. Their masters were impregnating black women. The black man, powerless, and angry, could not resolve the problem. He had no choice but to accept conditions as they were. He watched his wife take care of children that she bore for her master and his own children as well.

Additionally, the white man made excuses for his actions. He told his slave that his wife enjoyed having sex with him for her own sexual satisfaction. Black men subsequently began to view black women as sexual objects. Their sexual relations with black women denoted manhood. Anyone without was considered a "wimp" or a "sissy". Often words of love and care were
used to emotionally weaken the black female. The concern of black men to be men outweighs any harm that might have been caused to the female. If the female refused sexual advances, she was sometimes raped.

Unfortunately, black women have become victims of black males desire to be considered men. Despite the sexual insecurity of black men being developed many years ago, the sexual attitudes of black men remain. Many women feel that black men do not respect them for their individuality, but for his own sexual desires. When black female authors write about relationships of black men and women the husband is often considered the sexual aggressor. Although black women authors have been criticized for their portrayals, black men have failed to realize that these portrayals may be a reality.

Accordingly, black men have failed to realize that other factors that have been associated with them stem from the effects of slavery. The lack of the black man's ability to attain power in society has caused insecurity. His inability to gain adequate employment in order to provide for himself and his family has caused him frustration. His definition of manhood means to be the sole provider of the family. He feels this because this is what the white man has done, and anything he does is viewed as success. When
his wife accomplishes more than he does, he blames his failure on her. Many times his frustration is taken out on black women in the form of mental and physical abuse.

Also black men have been prone to blame their failures on black women. They have disregarded the fact that white society has always portrayed them as unsuccessful and that blacks have associated failure with themselves. The poverty conditions in which black men have lived has caused them to turn to alcohol, drug addiction and pimping in order to obtain money, rather than remaining in school to receive higher education to improve conditions for themselves. On the contrary, women have completed school more often than black men, and as a result have been able to gain jobs that would adequately support their families.¹

However, black men have never accepted the achievements of black women. Instead, they have degraded and mentally abused them in order to maintain control. Although women have allowed the abuse to continue, they have done so for the preservation of their marriage. Those who leave, leave with strong will and determination to provide for their children in

¹Wallace, pp. 157-162.
a better manner than their husbands have. It is common in the works of the female authors to portray women in roles of persons who have overcome difficulty with their spouses. In my opinion, when black women write their works they write from personal experiences or from visualizations. For instance, Maya Angelou's works are part of her biography. What she writes has actually taken place. The reader finds that the women in her biography possess determination to provide adequately for their families, while the male counterparts either desert her, is a part of extra marital affairs or other illegal activities.

Similarly, women have maintained roles and images that have developed from slavery. During slavery, women performed household duties, took care of children and did light tasks in the fields. As stated earlier she also was a sexual partner for her white master. Black men seldom view women in dominant roles. They eventually visualize her as mother and caretaker of the home.

Contrasting to the times of the past, black women have achieved tremendously. Although black women are proned to having lower skilled jobs, more black women are continuing their education and obtaining professional jobs. Yet, when black men characterize women in their works, old images remain prominent. The
black woman remains housewife and mother. In other works, the black woman is considered insignificant and basically plays no role at all.

Basically, the way blacks are viewed in society reflects the way we view ourselves socially and politically. Historically, black men have been considered powerless and meaningless in white society. Their inability to obtain powerful roles leaves them to be insignificant in society as a whole. Consequently, black men view themselves as unworthy individuals. They become a part of the negative roles (pimps, drug addicts) that white society places them. Instead of doing something to get out of the poverty conditions of which they are a part, they accept their traditional way of life. Many black men, though not all, fail to carry out their responsibility as father. Politically, they fail in their responsibilities to society. They do not see the importance of voting and choose not to take part in electing people to represent them.

However, there are those black men who have reached success, and can be considered the opposite of many black men in today's society. These men are considered representative role models for younger black men who are growing in today's society. They view themselves as adequate and feel they have attained a certain percentage of the power in this white dominated
society. These type men have "overcome" the negativism given to black men by white society.

Likewise, black women view themselves with little influence politically and socially within our society. Like black men, black women remained in powerless roles because society designates these roles for them. Many black women accept these roles while others try to gain higher status. Overall, women in general have become more politically influential. Their opinions are no longer considered to be of no value. Although black women still have much to gain, they have gained a great deal politically and educationally. They realize that the barrier of being black makes it hard, while being a black woman makes it more difficult to achieve in society. However, black women continue to strive to improve conditions for themselves. Although they have been cast in stereotypical roles, they will always continue to make accomplishments.

In order to overcome the past and the lack of influence by white society, black men and women must first overcome stereotypes among themselves. First, blacks must realize that the stereotypical images which have been cast upon them come from the white society. Black men and women must pull together, work together, and learn to accept the problems that have become a part of them. After the problems have been accepted,
they must develop solutions that will help surpass negative images of each other and develop methods to succeed. They must also develop a sense of confidence and pride of who and what they are. Consequently, better relationships and marriages can result. Lack of respect for one another will dissipate, and praises will overshadow criticisms. Thereafter, better marriages and role models will lead the way for an improved black society. Eventually, accomplishments rather than failures will result.

Finally, black male and black female authors can benefit the image of black society by portraying their characters in more positive images. Black authors could portray fictional characters in problems that are common in black society. Instead of leaving the reader with a negative impression at the conclusion of the novel, the authors can write about positive solutions that will help alleviate the problems. Each gender must begin by portraying its opposite gender in a more positive manner.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


