

THE THEME OF DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION IN SONIA SANCHEZ'S *I'M BLACK WHEN I'M SINGING, I'M BLUE WHEN I AIN'T*

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Abstract

This paper strives to analyze the theme of double marginalization in Sonia Sanchez's I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't. She deals with the major theme that is the struggle of African American women to gain equality as both blacks and as women. From her very first play she examines the values and rights of black women in the black as well as white community. In I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't (1982) she presents the protagonist Reena, her struggle to gain equality as both black and as a woman. Reena suffers from multiple personality disorder. Familial rejection is the cause of her mental illness. Mama B, the first person, shows the unequal treatment of blacks. Mama is unable to free herself from her social and educational limitations. She is marginalized both as a woman and as a black. She represents isolated, defeated black womanhood. Toni, the second personality, is raped and placed in a Catholic home for wayward girls. She represents the weakened stature of black women who lack the personal resources in facing the challenges of sexual and psychological abuse from members of their own communities. Malika is Reena's last personality. Malika is Sanchez's solution to the incomplete and harassed black female personalities in the play. She is a confidant and culturally centered young black woman. She knows the importance of self-worth and self-love. She offers Reena a comforting solution through a culturally rooted identity. It is a way to resolve her divisions. But, Reena does not give up her discreteness without a fight. Through the character of Malika Sanchez states the qualities necessary for a healthier black female soul and spirit.

Keywords: Double Marginalization, Black Women, Sonia Sanchez, militant plays, multiple personality disorder, black womanhood

Introduction:

Sonia Sanchez (1934-) is an African American poet, playwright and professor often associated with the Black Arts movement. She has authored a dozen of books of poetry, as well as plays and children's books. She advocated the introduction of black studies courses in California. She was the first to create and teach a course based on Black Women and Literature in the United States. She was a very influential part of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement. She wrote many plays and books that had to do with the struggles and lives of Black America. In 2000, Sanchez retired from Temple University after teaching there for more than twenty years. *I'm Black When I'm singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't* is Sanchez's most recent play. It deals with the issues of the black community. It was written in 1982.

Conceptual Background:

Being both black and female, black women can be identified with both Afro-Americans and women. As Showalter points out, for both Afro-Americans and feminists, the black woman is "the Other Woman, the silenced partner." Throughout the years, black women have protested against "the sexism of black literary history" as well as against "the racism of feminist literary history."¹ Black women have struggled to claim their own place in society. They state that they should be considered more than some sort of common denominator of Afro-Americanism and feminism. Instead, being both black and female, these women are "doubly marginalized"²

The term marginality has variously been defined. Some of these definitions are as follows:

The New Oxford American Dictionary's definition of the term, marginalize, is "(to) treat (a person, group or concept) as insignificant or peripheral: attempting to marginalize those who disagree."³

Peter Leonard defines marginality as, "being outside the mainstream of productive activity and or social reproductive activity."⁴

According to Ghana S Gurung and Michael Kollmair:

Marginality is generally used to describe and analyze socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where the disadvantaged people struggle to gain access (societal and spatial) to resources, and full participation in social life. In other words, marginalized people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected, and are, therefore, vulnerable to livelihood change.⁵

The Concept of 'Double Marginalization'

Different definitions, types and theories of marginality help to form the theory of 'double marginalization'. The present study focuses on the 'Double marginalization' of

African American women in the racial and male-dominant society. Literature is a mirror of the society. It reflects the predominant attitude of the society which frequently values men and masculine pursuits more highly than women and feminine pursuits.

Symbols and stereotypes are developed about women in a male-dominated society. Men created and fashioned the image of women to suit their needs. Men are 'center' while women are 'other'. This male's gender-linked otherness controls a subordinate group and a rationale which justifies and explains the oppression of those in a lower order. Black women had to suffer from double oppression as black and female while their counterparts suffered oppression as black.

Racism in the United States of America has always tried to destroy the peace of the African American people. The misconception in this regard is that African American women were less affected by such racist assault than the African American men. But, in reality, it was the African American woman who was the worst affected by such attacks. She is the real victim as she was doubly marginalized, which has been rightly exposed by Francis Beal as double jeopardy in her pamphlet *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. Beal's essay talks about the misconceptions and troubles which come across while analyzing the role of a black female in the society. The pamphlet is specially focused on different aspects of life, and how they related to black women or non-white women, compared to how they relate to white women and men and non-white men.

One particular part of the pamphlet is entitled "The economic exploitation of black women". This section briefly talk about the economics of black women and how, on an average in 1969, a non-white woman made approximately three times less than a white man. Frances M. Beal is a black feminist and a peace and justice political activist. She thus exposes the real economic condition of both racism and sexism. She throws light on marginalization and discrimination which create a pool of low-waged workers.

Physically and economically, African American women have not only been assaulted by the white society, but also by the men of their own race. They are double marginalized by the white as well as black society. Racist movements in America targeted African Americans in total and it affected both black men and women equally. But Beal depicts that certain black men think that they have been castrated by society but that black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation. The black woman in America can justly be described as a slave of a slave. The miserable oppression of black men made women's condition even worst. The black woman had no any protector and was used and is still being used as the scapegoat for the evils that this terrible system has perpetrated on black men. Her physical image has been maliciously maligned. She has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer. She has faced the worst kind of economic exploitation. She has been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white children. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped and to be powerless to reverse this condition.

Attempting to question about women in a different space, particularly in the African American space, in the post-colonial context, provides a provocative site for the articulation and discussion on the politics of identity. Beal criticized the woman's movement for its limited focus in *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* and says:

Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black woman's struggle.⁶

Interestingly, Beal brings in the aspects of mass struggle into the women's question and problematises a single role model to black women. She says:

We as Black women have got to deal with the problems that the black masses deal with, for our problems in reality are one and the same.⁷

But she undermines her own statement by raising the specific problem of black women that separates them from black men. She deconstructs the category 'Black Masses' by her phrase: "The Double Jeopardy: To be Black and female".

In the white dominated society the entire community of African Americans is racially discriminated. In this case there occurs a second type of discrimination which can be termed as 'Double Marginalization' or 'Double Jeopardy' which means the African American women dominated by African American men. Analyzing this particular issue by a male author is also completely different from a female author of the same society.

Assessment of the Theme of Double Marginalization in the Play:

In *I'm Black When I'm singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't* Sanchez closely examines the psychological effects of racist oppression of young black woman. By focusing on psychology, she resonates with the current post-colonial discourses and in particular the theories of Franz Fanon. Fanon's psychoanalytical, philosophical and psycho-political theories on the French Algerian conflict deal with the debilitating effects of colonization and similar forms of oppression. Jacqueline Wood in "Shaking loose": Sonia Sanchez's militant drama" argues that

He emphasized in particular a Freudian analysis of the pathological behaviors and sufferings that manifest in oppressed people. Mental breakdown, paranoia, and obsessive behaviors are some outcomes that occur, he concludes primarily within the white colonizer / the black colonized power paradigm.⁸

According to him the psychological problems such as mental breakdown, paranoia, and obsessive behaviors occurs in the oppressed community due to racial oppression. His major works are *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of The Earth*, which were accepted by the militant writers during the Black Art Movement and informed new ways for militant playwrights to look at the African American experience in the USA as a kind of colonization.

Sanchez's *I'm Black When I'm singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't* illuminates many of the Fanon's conclusions. The play deals with the racial, economic and social oppressions in the urban life and its harmful effects on the mental health of the young black woman, Reena

who is the main character of the play. She is a gifted young musician and singer, but is confined in a lunatic asylum due to the numerous personal traumas in her life. She suffers from multiple personality disorder and self-loathing because of the familial rejection due to the dark black skin. Her light mother treats harshly and humiliates her for her dark skin. She is both a color-struck and judgmental. Her husband is abusive and domineering. In a lunatic asylum Reena goes away from the conflict in her real life and enters into the relative safety where her different selves emerge.

Like Reena, a talented young singer/musician from Philadelphia, her selves, who are patterned after actual famed black American blues/jazz singers, is gifted in music and have experienced sexually and racially motivated traumas.⁹

This central conflict of the play is informed by similarities of Reena's selves to four historical black female singers. As Sanchez observes,

The person speaking [Reena] is maybe a Nina Simone type, a strong woman and sometimes, off killer for a minute. And there's a Bessie [Smith] type and a Billie Holiday type. And there is one going to replace Nina, a Dianne Reeves kind of person or Abbey Lincoln type, who is much more settled.¹⁰

Three different personalities arise in Reena. They are Mama B, Toni and Malika. These personalities are based on the three historical black female singers Nina Simone, Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith. Mama B is the first personality to reveal herself in Reena. She provides a glimpse of some of the most blatant and aggressive manifestation of white racism on black female lives. She is a wild, indecorous and greatly popular blues circuit singer. Though severely limited by dishonest white agents and producer, she has achieved monetary success. This makes her feel a rebellious sense of empowerment. She has run an illicit venue called "Buffet Flats", areas known for selling illegal bathtub gin offering prostitution and homosexual encounters. She dies due to the blatant inequalities in the American race culture of that period. She resembles in many ways the blues singer Bessie Smith, who was well-known for her earthy, engaging performance in the early 1920s.

Mama B is an innocent country girl in her twenties, new in singing field. Sanchez through the character of Mama B reveals the life and plight of Bessie Smith. Though Mama achieves a top position as a singer, she is treated just as a black woman. Her identity is limited with the two worlds as a "black" and as a "woman".

Business Manager is a representative of the white racist and sexist society. He allures Mama B by offering \$ 3,000 a year. He says,

Business Manager: ... and because we love you so much, here's a bonus of \$ 5000, 00. ... We even have someone to print the word colored on the record. Everybody will know who you are.¹¹

It shows that he is pretending that the whites love and respect blacks and especially black women. He also promises her that the recording will have the word “colored”, showing that it is by a colored woman. But in reality, though the song is sung by a black woman, her identity is hidden from the audience. White patriarchy does not allow the black woman to be a popular singer. Though the black woman has a singing voice and artistic sense, the white patriarchal and racial ideologies confine her in a domestic and repress her artistic quality. And now audience loves the voice of Mama B, so whites need her to earn money and Business Manager is producing Mama B for that.

At the end she dies like an ordinary black woman. In a car accident, she is severely injured as she drinks heavily. But a nearby hospital denies her a due treatment for being a black. Everything, including hospital is racist in America. Racism even does not give importance to life also. The doctors give importance to racist ideology than the life of a great singer. Though Mama B achieves a top position among both white and black singers, though she has wealth and fame, it does not matter for whites. For them she is just a black and especially a black woman. Jacqueline Wood in “Shaking loose”: Sonia Sanchez’s militant drama argues that,

Her ultimate demise retreats that money and fame cannot insulate her from the vicious outcomes of white racism and classism in America.¹²

The black woman has to do many illegal things under the pressure of whites against their will but with her death Mama B is free from this.

Toni reveals herself as the second personality, challenging Reena’s control. Toni’s character is based on another famed model, singer Billie Holiday. She was famous as a jazz singer from the 1930s through the 1950s. When she was not even in her teens, she was raped violently. She was sent to the Catholic Girls School and, prostitution until she achieves success in singing. She was jailed for drug possession and she finally died from a heroin overdose at the age of forty four. Toni, ten year old girl, is raped when she was returning home from school. But instead of punishing the man who has raped her, Toni is accused of tempting the man. Now she is placed in a Catholic home for wayward girls. White as well as black racist and sexist societies do not give justice to a black woman. Though she is innocent, she is punished. Toni represents all black women who are punished without any crime. Through Toni’s episode Sanchez criticizes the religious hypocrisy and also focuses how the religion plays major role in the marginalization and exploitation of women. At the age of ten Toni is confined in a Catholic home. She is banned to wear red dress which according to Catholic Matron symbolizes sin. For the purification of her soul, a dead body of a girl is left in her dark room. Sanchez criticizes all these methods of religious purification which are used to humiliate and exploit women. *The Bible* clearly tells the women, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husband as to the Lord.” It shows that religion also marginalizes women. Traditionally, women are also confined in the tradition and rituals. They have to do fast and worship of God and Goddesses. Compare to men, women are made more religious by these

means. Women should be pious and sacred. She is engaged in religious duties in order to keep her away from worldly temptations. But men are free to enjoy everything. Some men are doing religious duties, but not as much as any woman. So religion also marginalizes women. Her family and especially her mother are also involved in this matter. She also thinks that her daughter is diverted from the path. She is tempted towards worldly pleasure and she is needed some religious ways to bring up. Her mother complains about Toni's singing and loving music. Men are not banned from the hobbies of singing and listening music, but the woman is. Though Toni tries to persuade Catholic Matron, she does not show any sympathy. She pretends to be religious but does not have any religious straits. Without any sin, Toni is labeled as 'sin girl'. She is punished for singing. They will not allow her to watch anything except God. She should hear and sings the songs of God. Toni suffers varied forms of psychological abuses at the hands of the self- righteous nuns. They are intent upon reforming her supposed corruption.

Through Toni's mother Sanchez wants to show that how women are conditioned to think they are inferior to man. She tells Toni that woman is always in need of a man. She is made the slave of a slave as Francis Beale describes a black woman. Due to the years of playing the second role women regard themselves as a weak and subsidiary. So Toni's mother says that woman is always in need of a man. Traditionally, men are considered as rational and physically powerful being. They get the superior position in the society. They are considered to be the protector and decision-makers, both in the domestic management as well as in the public spheres. The roles women have played since long time attribute her qualities like emotional, irrational and submissive. Due to the traditional roles both men and women have been playing, have shaped their personalities accordingly. This belief of male superiority over female has been supported to maintain the present inequality between men and women. This explanation of male monopoly in social, political and economic spheres has left women powerless. Simon De Beauvoir rightly says that women are not born feminine, but are conditioned to be so through the process of social construction.

When Toni grows up, she is in need of a job of a singer. In her life she faces many problems. She is raped. Her family throws her into a catholic school and now she is grown up living alone the life of misery. With her song, she gets the job, earning \$ 18.00 a week and tips. At the Harlem club they have to walk around and strut their stuff and when the people offer tips, they have to pick up it with their bottom lips as informed by their manager. It means that the singer in the club has to do notorious things. The chorus asks Toni to make money by sensual activity. Manager having a black face informs them to do such illegal things. For the whites the black woman is a strong sexual object. But for their people, for the black men too, she is a sexual object. According to De Beauvoir woman is just a sex for the men. Sanchez also highlights the same. By doing the sensual movement of the body, they are making the black woman to earn money. Not only white but also black men marginalize the black woman for being a black and for being a woman too.

Toni refuses to do these things. She refuses to do anything except singing. Refusing these things to do is rejecting the job. Hence the black women in need of job have to do such illegal things against their will. Though she is a good blues singer, she is marginalized by the manager for being poor, black and woman. Without any pre-instruction he makes her to do vulgar things to earn money. Toni ultimately acquires great notoriety as a blues/jazz club singer. Toni loves Bill, a singer, she wants to marry. But her mother Mary is not ready for this marriage. Now also she is not free to do what she wants.

Sanchez here expresses the pain of black women. She wants to be free from the shackles of racism and sexism to which she is bound for centuries. Toni, achieving fame, is also in a cage of race. Her fame and money cannot overcome her feeling of worthlessness. She wants to escape from this feeling of loneliness and worthlessness. Eventually she takes heroin for this escape. Toni's damaged sense of womanhood is shaped by her victimization as an object of cruelty and relentless exploitation. Reena describes Toni as a stupid who does not hold herself. Sanchez through Reena's mouth advises all black women that, "You've got to support yourself against the silences of the world". (118)

Reena herself is disturbed black woman due to the maltreatment by her own mother and husband. When John and Josephine enter, Reena out of fear freezes. Her mother Josephine and husband John start instructing her,

Josephine: You're not going to wear your hair like that Nappy? ...

John: That's a stupid dress you're wearing today Reena. ... You're too black to wear white well. ... You're drinking too much Reena. And I'm taking the pills from you too.

Josephine: Where is the child? What kind of mother are you anyway? How can you take care of her properly if you're always on the road? ... (118)

Her mother hates her dark skin. She does not allow Reena to comb her hair how she likes and listens music that she loves. Her husband, John calls her as heavy drunkard, as an ass, also as a black ass. He is also abusing her and dominates her by the violent verbal attack. Josephine scolds her for not caring own child. They made her a victim. They put her in a subsidiary position. Since her birth, a woman has to listen to her parents, then her husband and at last of her children. Traditionally woman has not attributed any rights to live her life according to her own anguish. She is asked to behave according to the rules, regulations and norms which are established by the society for women. Everywhere in society and also in her own family, she is marginalized for being a woman. In the case of black woman, she is 'double marginalized' as she has to follow the regulations of both white as well as black society. She is frustrated for the rejection of her by her own mother and by her husband. She expects that they should accept her how she is. She calls them 'conspirators'. She is mentally disturbed because of them. She soothes herself by saying that "I'm Reena the long black lady of soul" and she begins to sing a song,

They'll try to kill us all/We must take a stand
...Tell them they're black and beautiful/And listen to them to talk
Cuz: We are Black/Blacker than the nite/... I said that did hear me?
Black is the beginning of everything. (119)

Reena through her song tries to convince her own people for unity. 'They' are refereed here to 'whites'. Whites are decided to exploit blacks, so they should decide something. They are trying to make blacks a dead living. So, she asks her people to come together and make a master plan. She advises the black parents to bring up children by praising them. Tell them that they are black and beautiful. Don't bother them with their (parents) expectations; just try to hear their will also. Reena expresses her own feelings. She has not been heard by her mother since her childhood. So she is mentally disturbed. She is expected to be fair and white by her mother that annoys her. She tells that as blacks are blacker than night and it is a truth that they cannot go away from their race. Getting away from blackness may be forgetting the history of blacks. It also means that blacks are trying to escape from their African heritage. She requests blacks that they should not forget their history, the history of slavery, pains, struggle and exploitation. She asks people to prove that, "Black is the beginning of everything".

At the end Sanchez presents Malika, Reena's final alter-ego from the Afrocentric seventies. She promises a unifying consciousness that needs all of these personalities. Malika is based on real-life model and jazz singer Abbey Lincoln. She was an American jazz vocalist, songwriter and actress. Malika is Sanchez's solution to the incomplete and harassed black female personalities in the play. Malika is well adjusted, confident and culturally centered young black woman whose strength comes out of her clear connection to her African heritage and her understanding of the essential nature of self-worth and self-love. She is Reena's positive, coherent and racially grounded final identity. Reena represents all black women who struggle their whole life with their own people and also with whites.

Through chorus, Sanchez gives solution to Reena. Chorus II says that Reena will never die. She will live forever in her. Reena represents all black women who struggle their whole life with their own people and also with whites. Jacqueline Wood in "Shaking Loose", states that,

As a symbolic black woman, she cannot see through her own struggles and weaknesses what holds her back. She fights the very insights that can help her attain personal freedom: the importance of sisterhood, communal cohesion, personal strength, and a cultural integrity that comes with a confidence in the relations of heritage and family.¹³

The strength she gets from the family bond will help her to put emphasis on internal bonding and make her to avoid racism, mental illness, jealousy and the bankruptcy of dominant social and personal values. In a way it will help her to avoid negative feeling. Reena challenges the audience and talks like a poem.

Reena: I came to you long and Black/Knew this face was ugly and sad
I came to when the rhetoric of the time/Pushed me to say Blackness
was bad, bad, bad!/. . . look at me/Set me free from years of hating my
face/. . . And my words got stuck in the sounds of your embrace. (123)

Reena here sings the agony of black woman for being a black. She explains how the society and family blame the black woman for being black. She is always hammered that, though she is tall and black, she is ugly. She is always said that blackness is bad. The black woman is always made to think that she is an unworthy as she is black. It makes Reena sad. She now asks the audience, which represents society, both black and white for relieving her from the feeling of inferiority, unworthiness and hate. She wants relief from the feeling of hating herself. Reena knows that the audience does not like her 'Blackness'. So she always tries to run away from the blackness. She tries to become what she can never be. She cannot leave her blackness. And the audience will not accept her blackness. She feels sad that she can never fulfill the audience expectation and vice versa. Here, Reena represents the agony of an ordinary black woman who is 'double marginalized' by the society for her blackness and for her feminine qualities. In Malika, Sanchez inculcates the qualities which are necessary for a healthier black female soul and spirit. So she represents all good qualities of Nina Simone, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Abbey Lincoln. Hence Reena asks her to sing in order to represent the best qualities of all black women. Here Reena also focuses on the title of the play, *I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't*. For Africans, black color stands for power and strength, whereas blue color stands for depression loneliness and sadness. When Reena sings, she feels proud to be a black and she also feels powerful. When she is not singing she is blue. It means without singing, she feels lonely, depressed and sad. Singing provides an outlet for her feelings of inferiority, marginality and of negligence. So she asks Malika to come and sing like all black women so the truth of black women's life will come out and the society will understand the plight of black women.

Now Malika asks all black community to stop getting exploited as a slave, as a black. Together, she decides to change the situation of black woman and the black community. The drama points out an ongoing African American awareness of post-colonial thought, their acknowledgement of the complexity of self and communities, because they are affected by racial, gendered and political oppression. Sanchez puts forth the need of understanding, acquiring, celebrating cultural education. It is a main solution to the preservation of healthy black communal identities.

Conclusion

Sanchez depicts that the black families are responsible for the marginalization of black women. She gives a message to the black parents to encourage their children to achieve their goal in spite of many problems. They should not expect from white liberals to encourage blacks for their empowerment. She reiterates this message through Reena's dismissal of her family, especially her mother and husband due to her dark skin. Reena's family is responsible

for her mental disorder. She represents all such black women who are marginalized and humiliated by their own family.

Sanchez criticizes all the religious methods of purification which are simply used to humiliate and exploit women. Sanchez's Toni and Reena are the examples of victims of religious hypocrisy. Women are expected to be pious and sacred. They are engaged in religious duties in order to keep them away from worldly temptations. But men are free to enjoy everything. Some men perform religious duties, but not as much as any woman. So it can be surmised that the religious methods are used to marginalize the black women.

Through the characters of Reena and Toni, Sanchez clearly shows that black women are used as an object of sexual pleasure. According to Simon De Beauvoir woman is just a sex for the men. She adds that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman. The male monopoly in social, political and economic spheres has left women powerless. Sanchez has highlighted this issue in this play. She expects from all the black women to be like Malika. All the black women should be well adjusted, confident and culturally centered and they should gather strength from their connection to their African heritage and their understanding of the essential nature of self-worth and self-love.

The title of the play is very apt. Reena focuses on the title of the play, *I'm Black When I'm singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't*. For Africans, black color stands for power and strength, whereas blue color stands for depression, loneliness and sadness. When Reena sings, she feels proud to be a black and she also feels powerful. When she is not singing, she is blue. It means without singing, she feels lonely, depressed and sad. Singing provides an outlet for her feelings of inferiority, marginality and of negligence. All the black women characters presented by Sanchez find solace, peace, happiness and freedom from slavery, racism, classism and patriarchy only in music and dance. It can be concluded that all the black women characters Reena, Mama B, and Toni in the present play are the victims of double marginalization in the society. They are exploited and humiliated on the basis of race and gender by the black as well as the white community.

Notes:

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11. Sonia Sanchez. *I'm Black When I'm Singing. I'm Blue When I Ain't and Other Plays*. ed. Jacqueline Wood (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 107. All quotations from the play have been taken from this edition. Page numbers in parenthesis have been given in the body of the text.
12. Jacqueline Wood, "Shaking Loose": Sonia Sanchez's Militant Drama," 58
13. Jacqueline Wood, "Shaking Loose": Sonia Sanchez's Militant Drama," 59.