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Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, *Womanbeing and Womanself: Characters in Black Women's Novels*

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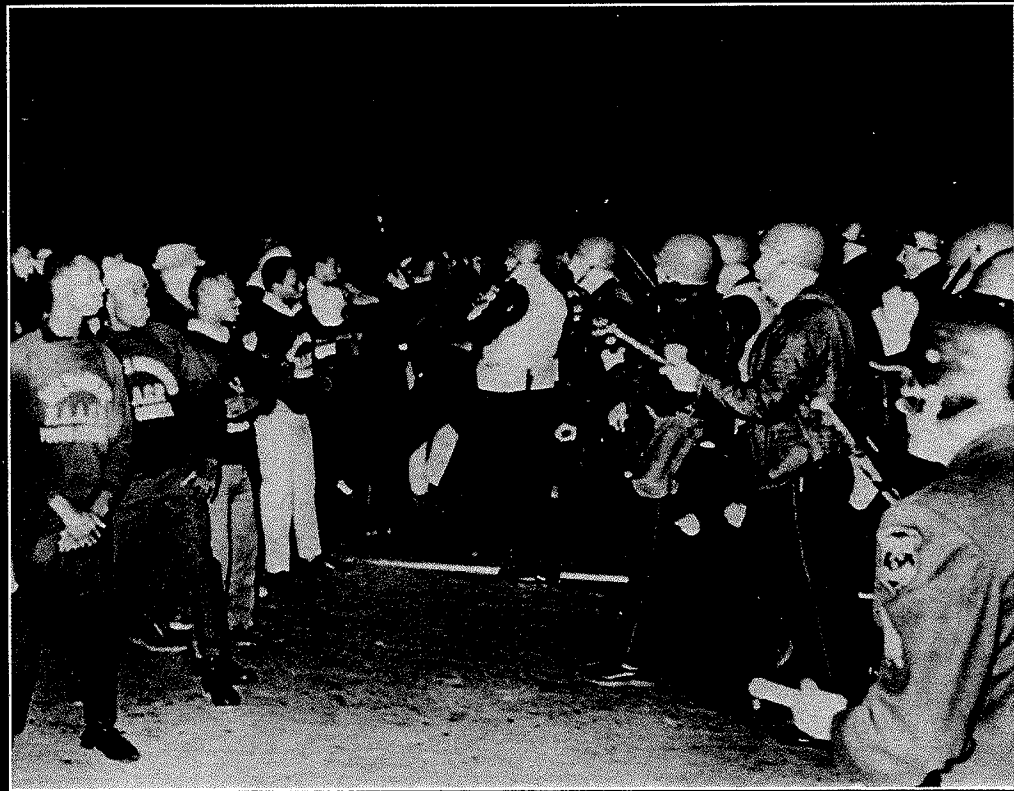
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Prior to the mid-1960s, the representations of black female characters in African and African American literature first came filtered through the lens of white and black male novelists in the United States and black male novelists on the African continent. However, the “emergence” of black women writers on the literary scene presented female characters distinct from the stark representations created from the male imagination. With these post-1960s literary portrayals, the cardboard, one-dimensional image/characterization of the black female as other than a male “appendage” was all but laid to rest. Armed with the literary works of a number of African women writers—Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa—and African American women writers Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Paule Marshall, *Womanbeing and Womanself* by Phanuel Egejuru has deftly confirmed these major literary developments and artistic achievements.

Divided into twelve unconventionally designated/unnumbered “chapters,” *Womanbeing and Womanself* takes on the central issue of black womanhood—that attendant theme which reverberates through the novels of African and African American women writers. Beginning with the title essay, “Womanbeing and Womanself,” Egejuru carefully takes the reader through a what, how, and why analysis—a mapping, as it were, of the experience of black womanhood. The titles for the subsequent chapters are intriguing and informative: “Womanbeing and Wifehood,” “Silence of Dead-Living Women,” “Three Dead-Living Women,” “Patriarchy Bows to Womanself,” “Irrepressible Womanself,” “Womanself in a Deadly Mix of Culture and Religion,” “Suspended Womanself: Tambudzai,” “A Hyper Womanself: Nyasha,” “Ultra Womanself: Pilate,” “Impregnable Womanself: Silla & Selina,” and finally, “Woman Condition and Education.” In these chapters Egejuru explores and exposes the dynamic movement of black womanhood from the static stages of “womanbeing” to the imposing levels of dynamic, devil-may-care “womanself.”

Two among many quoted passages in “Womanbeing and Womanself,” the opening chapter, frame the central issue: writing womanself into the overall experience of black womanhood. The passages include Granny’s blunt assessment of the state of black womanhood—“De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur

as Ah can see”—given to teenage Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. We read Shingayi’s advice to her strong-willed daughter, Tambudzai, “This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. . . . What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength,” in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. These perspectives help to frame Egejuru’s argument. She eschews engagement in a convoluted discussion of theories (in this case the Sartrean terms the book’s title invokes, or the Alice Walker-like womanist/feminist premise) that could have easily weighed down the essential “unpacking” of the prism through which the “wholeness” of the black womanhood experience of being should be viewed.

Egejuru focuses on the twin concepts of “womanbeing” and “womanself” and defines these complex-sounding terms of duality and polarity in an unadulterated, enumerative language (some culled from her Igbo culture and language). She explains exactly what constitutes “womanbeing” and what forces “womanself” to emerge and why. “Simply defined,” she writes, “womanbeing is a state of being and living as prescribed and imposed on woman by man and society.” It is an artificial construct, created and sustained by men, and is “the reification of woman by man and society.” Physically, it is the situation that allows men the prerogative to do as they please with women. It is the condition that swallows and destroys a woman’s self in patriarchal societies governed by the exploitive “because you are a girl” dictum. In such societies, women are doubly victimized for “being female” not only by the larger society, but by their own people. Thus, psychologically, “womanbeing” is that unnatural condition that represses the nascent human “womanself.” While “womanbeing” is to subsume the sense of self and lose oneself in the “heavy burden” of womanhood, “womanself” (incidentally, itself a construct) is to be secure in oneself, having pride and self-assurance, establishing and actualizing oneself, believing like Alice Walker’s Sofia that one is “as good as anyone else” and making no apologies about it.

In twelve chapters Egejuru explores the epistemology of the black women writers she has selected, arguing that the twin concepts are central to the emergence of women’s “voices” speaking and acting for “the host of womanbeings” in the novels. Egejuru establishes a continuum of character types, from the archetypal ones who remain stuck in the “womanbeing” condition to the devil-be-damned who reclaim their “womanself,” to the ones who straddle the two extremes. The large cast of characters ranges from Celie, Nnu Ego, Ona, Amaka, Janie, Janie’s Granny, Corinthians Dead, Ruth Foster Dead, Shingayi, Maiguru, and Fusena at different points along the “womanbeing end of the continuum,” to Sofia, Efur, Shug Avery, Esi, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Pilate Dead, Margaret and Dikeledi, and Silla and Selena, straddling the middle and end points of the “womanself.” Egejuru presents one perceptive character analysis after another, offering insights into the numerous complexities of the lives

of these black women characters. She also shows how the writers navigate the strictures of patriarchal culture and religion, arguing convincingly that these novels demonstrate a unique progression from “womanbeing” to “womanself.”

Thus, given the inevitable traversing back and forth along the continuum, the key question remains: What happens when “womanbeing” and “womanself” are on a collision course and do battle in one female body? Inevitably, as in the case of Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie, such women simply “starch and iron [their] face and put on a veil,” maintain a double self, to ensure that the nascent womanself is preserved, because undoubtedly, “[t]here’s living grandma’s way and there’s one’s own way.”

Perhaps a mere coincidence, but there’s much to be said for the effectiveness of the purposeful choice of the sepia-colored photographs of women as the front and back covers of the book. The faces, the poses, the body language, the fashion statements—each a narrative all its own—corroborate the burdens and triumphs of black womanhood far beyond Egejuru’s twelve chapters. In “Woman Condition and Education,” the final chapter, as if to preempt the often cited simple panacea to solving the complex “burden of womanhood” question, Egejuru debunks the rather simplistic claim that “formal education” is the answer, arguing that while education is a “curative antidote to ignorance,” without “human will,” the real repository of change and agency, the transformative power of “formal education to empower the educated to question and reject unjust rules and treatments is debatable at best.” An array of characters such as Maiguru, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Nyasha are presented to support this claim.

Clearly, the book’s merit lies in its refreshing accessibility and erudition without making any lofty claims to theorizing. Indeed, this latter credit also constitutes a defect. Simply, the book appears and reads like an assemblage of the products of years of continuously refined ideas, seminar lectures, and the kind of engaged (graduate-level) discussions that ensue based on the assumption that students are not only familiar with the text and context of the novels, but have also acquired relevant grounding in the theoretical. This is its pedagogical value for “engaging” the novels of African and African American women writers.

A few editorial inconsistencies are noticeable. The use of hyphens in place of dashes throughout the book is perhaps (I hope) more a word processing glitch than a serious editing problem. The random use or omission of quotation marks and the unclear blending of quoted and paraphrased texts is a bit confusing, and the absence of an index is unfortunate. However, despite these drawbacks, *Womanbeing and Womanself: Characters in Black Women’s Novels* is an excellent, accessible analysis and aid to understanding characterization in novels by black women writers.

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