

Indian-/Bengali-American Womanism

S.SINDHU

Assistant Professor, Sree Narayana Guru College, Coimbatore

The 'Self-Naming' Problem In her 1993 book Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves, Cleonora Hudson- Weems writes:

The Africana woman, in realizing and properly accessing herself and her movement, must properly name herself and her movement Africana womanist and Africana Womanism. This a key step, which many women of African descent have failed to address. While they have taken the initiative to differentiate their struggle from the White woman's struggle to some degree, they have yet to give their struggle its own name.

Like Gogol, Lahiri's womanism is in a perpetual search for its own name and definition. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, Lahiri and her characters are not Africana they are Bengali-Americans, and while they well display the maternity and male-female cooperation of African/a womanism, they do not always follow suit with the theories of Ogunyemi or Hudson-Weems. In her "Afterthought" to Africana Womanism, Third Edition, Hudson-Weems addresses the issue of naming non-Africana womanisms:

Since I have been working on the theory of Africana Womanism, many of my non-Africana colleagues have told me that they closely identify with the concept and even embrace much of it as representative of their level of struggle today: the eighteen characteristics of the Africana woman are universal. However, the terminology itself poses a problem for them since they are not of African descent. Indeed, because they cannot claim to be Africanans themselves, the challenge for me then becomes the concern for creating a means of bringing the terminology and concept within the context of a broader worldview. Deleting the first part of the coinage, Africana, and leaving only the second part, womanism, is problematic, since Alice Walker has

already defined the term Womanism as being very closely akin to feminism.

In coining the term Africana Womanism, two things were of utmost importance to me – ethnicity and gender, both of which are grounded in the context of the particular experience of the subject. The same kind of concern for details and particularity regarding ethnicity and gender are just as crucial for all women in naming and defining their reality. Therefore, after much consideration I have concluded that those who accept and identify with the underlined ideology of Africana Womanism, but whose roots are other than African, could hold the term womanism and preface it, as has the Africanan, with their particular ethnic orientation. For example, we would have the Native-American Womanist, the European Womanist, the Hispanic Womanist, the Asian Womanist and so on.(145)

Yet, simply re-naming womanism such as Lahiri's Bengali-American characters manifest is still problematic. The differences in history between African, Bengali/Indian, and Bengali-/Indian-American cultures have manifested different cultural identities warranting a new name and definition for Bengali-/Indian-American womanism.

Afrocentricity in Womanism

Recall Hudson-Weems' eighteen characteristics of an Africana womanist:

- (1) a self-namer and (2) a self-definer; (3) family-centered, (4) genuine insisterhood, (5) strong, (6) in concert with male in struggle, (7) whole, (8) authentic, (9) a flexible role player, (10) respected, (11) recognized, (12) spiritual, (13) male compatible, (14) respectful of elders, (15) adaptable, (16) ambitious, (17) mothering and (18) nurturing.

While Ashima centrally embodies the maternal, self-defining adaptability of Hudson-Weems's

characteristics, she does not possess any outstanding sense of physical strength similar to that of Africana womanists. Aside from strength of character, Ashima does not possess the kind of physical strength Hudson-Weems attributes to women and men of the African diaspora as a result of their endurance of slavery and racial violence in and from cultures who endorsed slavery. "From its very nature, Africana Womanism has a definite slant toward Afrocentricity in its truest meaning/sense", Hudson-Weems admits. In addition to historical cultural differences, Lahiri shows a loss of culture in both Gogol's identity articulation between Bengali-American and American identities (as opposed to the negotiation of purer Bengali and American identities his parents underwent) in *The Namesake* and Kaushik's loss of maternity in "Hema and Kaushik" that is inconsistent with the Afrocentricity or return to African values described by Hudson-Weems in her version of womanism. Take, for example, Hudson-Weems following quote, the last paragraph of the conclusion of her 1993 book on womanism:

If all Africana men respected the original reality of the equality of both sexes in African cosmology, then they would refuse to continue to allow external forces, such as non-traditional African religions and alien political family structures wherein female subjugation is inherent, to influence their lives and ways. The end result would be that Africana people (men and women) the world over would then collectively struggle towards recovering their natural birthright as determiners of their fate as a liberated people, dedicated to their families and their future generations.(144)

Here, Lahiri differs from Hudson-Weems's Africana womanism. Despite her manifestations of cultural maternity, Lahiri depicts cultural essentialism as in vain. Culture in its purest form, Lahiri implies in her fiction, cannot be saved, if ever it even existed. Hudson-Weems's following words on Africana womanism certainly apply to Ashima's cultural adaptation and maternity: "In spite of all, she was a woman and a mother, not mere property, and no matter what, her White owners could neither control nor dictate her knowledge of these factors or her human response to them". The oppression Ashima faces is wholly unlike the oppression experienced by

members of the African diaspora, who were often subjected to slavery, its violence, and/or the resulting racism slavery bred or, conversely, the racism enacted to justify slavery.

Likewise, it is true that Indian women are more like African women in the following dichotomy of Awa Thiam's from *Black Sisters, Speak Out*: "Where Black women have to combat colonialism and neo-colonialism, capitalism and the patriarchal system, European women only have to fight against capitalism and patriarchy". However, Indian women do not necessarily experience what Daphne Williams Ntiri invokes in her introduction to Hudson-Weems, "The status, struggles and experiences of the Africana woman in forced exile in Europe, Latin America, the United States or at home in Africa remain typically unique and separate from that of other women of color". Indian women and their families are not, for the most part, in forced exile. Nor do Lahiri's characters explore womanism in non-Bengali-American contexts and landscapes. Indeed, as Ntiri points out, "So necessary are the reasons to advocate a theory that is properly labeled".

"The Africana womanist also presents herself as a self-definer; she alone defines her reality. From a historical perspective, the Africana woman has always managed to eke out a separate, private reality for herself and her family, regardless of that defined by the slave master, for example", Hudson-Weems writes. The African woman Hudson-Weems describes has a history and culture different from the history of culture and of Ashima. Yet, the cultural maternity Ashima bestows on her children is very much alike to the cultural maternity theoretically articulated in womanist works. Lahiri's womanist manifestations of cultural effects, which greatly compliment African/a womanist articulations, contradict a cohesive notion of African and Bengali causality. And so the Afrocentricity of womanism begs many questions. Is womanism too specific in its theoretical origins, or, if it is adapted in a global sense, will womanism then become too plural? And, of course, can "womanism," with its Afrocentric roots, be considered a proper name for a theory to describe the historically different but resultingly similar Bengali maternity Lahiri manifests?