
Negotiating Space: The Female Body as a Site of Power in the Literature of Contemporary American Women of Colour

Nawazish Azim

The theme of exploring the dialectic between space which exerts power and the body of the coloured woman which receives or resists power is a recurrent one in the literature of women of colour. My paper is an attempt to map the female coloured subject and locate her within the coordinates of body, self, identity and subjectivity by exploring:

1. the body which is the site of power, in other words - oppressive practices and ideology,
2. the collective body of community as a means of resisting this aforesaid oppression, and
3. the journeys the body undertakes as means of negotiating this complex nexus of power.

To begin with, space is not just a geographical quality. As Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974, trans 1991) says, it could mean real, external world as well as indicate the realm of mentality. While a place is a specific location, space is a 'practiced place' - a site which is motivated by movements, actions, narrative and signs, and a landscape is that site encountered as image. Space therefore is a repository of experiences and ideology, and exerts power over the body which occupies space. This is why Ed Soja in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989) suggests that 'relations of power and discipline are inscribed

into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life', and discusses how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.' Also, as resistance is the force which counters power domination, bell hooks calls for a community of resistance and a re-visioned spatiality which treats marginality as a strategic positioning of identity. In this way, Adrienne Rich's idea of 'politics of location' becomes a way of defending the individual's subjectivity.

In my paper, I suggest that the body of the woman of colour becomes the site for power struggles and is either favoured or debased according to the social and spatial setting. In order to support my argument, I will attempt a reading of various texts, authored by women of colour, whether African-American, Asian American or Native American. The narratives I take up are 'A Girl's Story' by Toni Cade Bambara, 'Black is a Woman's Colour' by bell hooks, 'Reunion' by Thadious M Davis, 'africans sleeping in the park at night,' 'Adolescence' by Rita Dove, *Shango Diaspora: An African-American Myth of Womanhood and Love* by Angela Jackson (all texts by African-Americans), 'Muliebrity' by Sujata Bhatt, 'Motown' by Smokey Robinson, Nellie Wong's poem 'When I Was Growing Up' (all texts by Asian Americans), 'Spider Dream' by Elaine Hall, Joy Harjo's 'I Give You Back', and Linda Hogan's 'The Lost Girls' (all texts by Native Americans). My purpose in taking up this diverse collection of texts is to not only explore issues of body, power and spatial politics in all three racial-cultural communities of American society but also to traverse the network of linkages between them. Let us now explore these issues in detail and determine the relation between space and the female body in American multi-cultural society.

I.

To begin with, 'A Girl's Story' is a short story within Toni Cade Bambara's short story collection, *The Seabirds are Still Alive* (1977).

Bambara writes about strong female girls in this particular collection because "in her vision, in her politics, little girls matter". In 'A Girl's Story', a young girl named Rae Ann experiences menstruation for the first time. Her fear, anxiety, sense of guilt and helplessness are mapped onto the site of her body, which grapples to deal with physical and psychological onslaught of womanhood. The very first sentence 'She was afraid to look at herself just yet' positions the terrifying experience of womanhood onto the body of the African-American woman, and parallels the fear and powerlessness, which the African-American woman subject experiences in socio-political life. Rae Ann's attempts to stop herself from bleeding and her inability to understand it as anything other than as punishment are significant in this compelling narrative, hinting that the body is the location of violence and blood-shed in the history of oppression of the Black female. Also, the inability of Rae Ann's brother Horace to understand her and the lack of compassion in his voice is significant of the fact that black women have to deal with the twin evils of patriarchy as well as racism. They rob the girl of her agency, since even at the end of the story, Dada Bibi, the saviour who is a symbol of undiluted African-ness, does not come; the dream of resisting and gaining subjectivity, based on the idea of belonging to a unified community remains unfulfilled.

The sense of community refused here is however achieved in other African-American poems such as 'Reunion' by Thadious M Davis, where the body becomes the site of celebrating collective womanhood. The girls in this poem 'eye their womanhood', 'fix their hair', 'giggle', 'stand arm-in-arm', 'whisper', and 'kiss behind hibiscus', all of which are bodily actions. Even after they grow up and move out, they 'hear their voices clairvoyant/... see into ourselves the love/ know into nights the bond', thus stating that the sense of collective belonging to a community is the key to their resistance to

power structures, and to reconstructing their subjectivities.

In other African American narratives such as the poem 'africans sleeping in the park at night' we see that there is ambiguous treatment of the body of the coloured woman. The body is the site of belonging to the community in the initial stanzas of the poem. The narrator is asked if she wants to 'lie on the grass/... feel the warm fire in (her) belly/ the heartbeat in (her) head/ and dragon's breath...in her nostrils..' In this way, the narrator will be rendered capable of identifying herself as an 'african sleeping in the park...'. This sense of belonging to the community is however undercut at the end of the poem when the narrator says that her 'breath is inseparable from the wind' and revels in the space of the marginalized within the marginalized; the space signifying freedom and individuality. In this way, the narrator achieves a unified subjectivity away from the community, in the bell hooksian paradigm of identity.

In other poems by African American women such as the 'Adolescence' series by Rita Dove, the girl's body is the site of desire, resistance and oppression. When she imagines that her scabs would fall away at the touch of her lover-saviour, her body becomes a site of desire coupled with resistance. Conversely, these poems also talk about the male body, firstly about the lips of a boy, and secondly about three men who visit the girl in the bathroom. The 'softness' of the boy's lips is contrasted with the fear the three men arouse in the girl, hinting at the presence of desire coupled with violence which is about to assault the body of the young girl. Body as site of desire provides link to other narratives such as *Shango Diaspora: An African-American Myth of Womanhood and Love*, a play by Angela Jackson, where the body of the Girl is the site of desire and oppression, into which Shango drains his terrible fire. His control over her erupts in the form of fever which the Girl suffers from in the beginning of the play. Also, when the Girl and Shango finally

reconcile, they do so in the form of a circular dance, thereby foregrounding the body again. (Thus, dance enacting desire is an integral bodily action, and recurs as a significant part of growing up in other poems on African American culture.)

This provides a link to poems/narratives by Asian Americans too, such as Sujata Bhatt's poem 'Muliebrity', where the female form is emphasised as the site of desire, power and resistance. It is about a girl who gathers dung. She has lived and worked in the most restricted of spaces and yet radiates a 'power glistening through her cheekbones' thereby emerging as a woman of strength, beauty and resistance. In this way, she is the primordial Woman who has come to occupy the marginalized space which offers resistance to patriarchal and racist conceptions of Asian American womanhood. In another Asian American poem, 'Motown' by Smokey Robinson, the body of the coloured woman is again a site of desire. Here however the underlying theme of sexual exploitation is stronger since there is a hint that the girl may have been sold by her father on arriving in America. She later gets pregnant at a party, thus making her body the site of acting out of patriarchal control, and considers how 'manila/the mission/Chinatown/east la/harlem' are all the same when it comes to gender oppression, and yet the ending is not totally devoid of hope since the poem ends with the line 'Smokey Robinson still looks good!', with Robinson here being the signifier of the woman's hopes and dreams.

II.

A related theme to spatial negotiation of power is the construction of body of the coloured woman as a site of physical ugliness and how it is challenged. In this regard, Nellie Wong's poem 'When I Was Growing Up' in fact is the most chilling depiction of racist and sexual oppression in the entire Asian American group of writers. The

narrator's shame in her dark skin, leads to her wearing an 'imaginary pale skin' which she thinks will help her become one of the white girls, and belong to the American way of life. She wants white skin and sensuous lips, as proof of womanhood, and clothes and accessories which white girls wore to school. She also feels ashamed at the sickly bodies of Chinese men and feels that her self can never be clean as it is not white. In this way, Wong shows that beauty and womanhood are judged by white standards, and they appear as the normative to the narrator. The body of the woman of colour becomes a playground to act out the struggle between this oppressive ideal of beauty and the narrator's natural state of female-ness. In this way, her subjection of her coloured body into white skin so to speak is a mapping out of the politics of colour and race. The coloured woman's body becomes the site of white supremacy, and yet at the end of the poem, we get a sense that the poet now realizes her mistake and is resistant in retrospect. Her agency and subjectivity are recovered in the end of the poem by her realization of her earlier passive submission to racist control which she challenges now. This is why she says 'I know now once I longed to be white/ How many ways you ask/ Haven't I told you enough?'

In tone and treatment, this story is similar to 'Black is a Woman's Colour', where bell hooks talks about hair, and the process by which black women used to straighten their naturally curly hair in order to be 'womanly' and beautiful like white women. The white conception of beauty is here being accepted as the normative which hooks defies later by wearing an afro in college, which highlights her identity differentially. In this way, the body of the black female subject becomes the site for situating oppressive ideas of ideal beauty, which is resisted later on in the story. Also, the woman's body becomes the site of patriarchal oppression, as the mother is beaten up by the husband and the daughter is beaten up by the mother as a means of

showing solidarity to the husband.

This does not mean that body of woman of colour is nothing but a site of exploitation. In fact, in Native American poems/narratives, the woman of colour is mostly seen and celebrated as the survivor of oppression; her body a site of hope and freedom. 'Spider Dream' by Elaine Hall is an exercise in post-memory whereby the poet imagines an open sore running the length of an old scar on her leg, which is a signifier of trauma suffered in the past. Post memory is a psychological and literary practice by which the memories of trauma of the past suffered by the older generation are experienced by the present generation. The poet hints that the presence of the spider and her new eggs which run 'to find water, or forgiveness or just a way of living', is a pointer to the fact that the present generation can deal with the traumas of the past on their own, and are not totally devoid of hope. In the same strain, we find Joy Harjo's 'I Give You Back' to be a powerful poem on the renunciation of fear and the celebration of hope. The lines 'Oh you have choked me but I gave you the leash/ You have gutted me but I gave you the knife/ you have devoured me but I laid myself across the fire/ You held my mother down and raped her but I gave you the heated thing' indicate again the location of sexist and racist discrimination on the body of the woman of colour. The whole tone of the poem however is celebratory and it deals with how the poet gives up fear, which is her loved and hated twin, her shadow, and her blood, in order to survive, and to regain her subjectivity.

In the other poem by Linda Hogan, 'The Lost Girls', the poet talks about the division of the unified self of the coloured woman. She says that she lost versions of her self, girls who 'refused to work too hard' and who 'danced away the leather of red high heels' at some points in time, and wants to regain them. This is indicative of the way the poet is regaining her agency, and 'loving all the girls and women she has always been'.

In this way, the body of the coloured American women negotiate spatial politics twofold; by suffering from as well as resisting oppressive domination and power exerted firstly by racial discrimination, as well as by the derogatory standards of normative beauty. Hence, the female coloured body becomes a 'site' for negotiating oppression, whether racial or cultural or patriarchal. In this way, negotiating space by means of the body, is a means of negotiating power and oppression. The resistance demonstrated to this spatial power by some of the women-poets is also reflected in the imagining of the community as a 'collective body' of resistance. Hence, spatial politics acquires multi-fold dimensions in relation to the female body of colour in American multi-cultural life, and it is this precise confluence of geocriticism and body politics that I have explored by means of the various and diverse collection of texts in my paper. The essay 'Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination' by Native American Leslie Marmon Silko is a good way to conclude my arguments. It deals with the links between geographical and psychic space where territorial possession and collective consciousness is mapped. Silko says that the space of the land is mapped onto the mind, often becoming a character in fiction, and the land itself becomes a repository of memory, history and imagination. In this way, the body of the land is symptomatic of the body of the woman of colour where the effects of power struggle are traced. It is here that memories and fictions merge together and create a sacred space for the emergence of the imagination of resistance and counterforce. Thus the body of woman of colour is itself a signifier for the geographic territory which is the location of struggle. In this way, the female body bears the possibility of emerging as a site for exercising oppression as well as fuelling resistance. It is physical and psychological, personal and social, biological and cultural. It may be the site of oppression, or the site of desire, or the site of resistance, or all of these

at once. This is why the idea of the body moving through space i.e journeying or travelling as a means of negotiating this power is a recurrent trope in these extracts. Here, we see how women travel across in order to physically survive in the world and rebuild their subjectivities. In this sense, walking, running, or commuting are important metaphors for the journey of the self which the woman of colour undertakes. The body moves through space and gains in agency and subjectivity. It is also an exercise in the idea of post-memory which reminds these women of the Journey which their ancestors undertook first into mainland America and later out of the oppressive geo-political American reality into a relatively safer world harbouring a greater degree of freedom and subjectivity, which allows them today to voice their positionality.

Characters such as the Girl in Shango Diaspora can only become Ms Waters after she has travelled physically and psychically to meet Yemoja, the goddess and we know this is so when Yemoja says 'You have come to the right place. Glad you passed the test...Why you think you have to walk this far to find me? Anybody whining and worthless can't come to me. Very few know my address, where I can be reached. Very few have crossed the bridge my mouth makes or swings shut.'

In this way we see how mapping the female coloured subject and locating her within the coordinates of space, body, self, identity and subjectivity by exploring the body as the site of power and the means of resisting this power is a recurrent theme in the literature of women of colour. Hence, spatial politics acquires multi-fold dimensions in relation to the female body of colour in American multi-cultural life, and it is this precise confluence of geocriticism and body politics that I have attempted to explore in my paper.

Bibliography:

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