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Black Eve or Madonna? A Study of the Antithetical Views of the Mother in Black American Literature

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by DARYL C. DANCE

In the biblical story of the creation we find a situation not unlike that in accounts of the creation of the world in other ancient myths. We find that woman is half accountable for the sins of the world—for the downfall and destruction of mankind. It is Eve who succumbs to the temptations of the world and who also tempts Adam to eat the apple and thereby calls down the wrath of God upon the two of them as well as their children and all of their children's children, all succeeding generations.

But if it is woman in the person of Eve who gives birth to the sins of the world which destroy man, it is also woman in the person of Mary who gives birth to the Savior who brings redemption and salvation to man.

Within these two extreme views of woman—the mother who brings death and destruction versus the mother who brings life and salvation—where does the Black American mother stand? It seems to me that it would not be inappropriate to look at the literature, not as mere fiction, but rather as an interpretation and compilation of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and a host of other areas. Thus the true literary artist reveals life more accurately and with more insight than any historical facts and statistical details, because he deals with the truth of the human heart,

with the realities of man in society. Therefore, let us consider what our literary artists have had to say about the role of the Black American mother.

A surface reading of Black literature may well lead one to the disturbing conclusion that the Black American mother is an Eve who has succumbed to the tempting allurements and wiles of the Devil—the Devil in this case being white American society—and that this Black Eve offers to her Black men the poisonous apple that will destroy him, that will repress his spirit and vitality, kill his pride in his Blackness, and render him impotent in a hostile white world. Such a curse cannot help but damn future generations of Blacks, and thus this threatening evil force must of necessity be hated, repelled, and, if possible, destroyed.

One of the most talented of our contemporary writers, LeRoi Jones, or Amiri Baraka, has written a morality play called "Madheart" in which one character, lest we miss the symbolism, is named Mother. Having eaten of the tree of white American life, Mother is a prostitute and a drunkard, intoxicated not only by wine but also by the lure of white society and its symbols. She loves and wants to protect white Devil Lady, who wishes to seduce and destroy Black men. She hates her Black men and is appalled and bewildered by the Black youths and their appreciation of their Blackness. As the major character, Black Man, views this old, diseased, broken woman and her "lost" daughter, he asserts, ". . . this can't go on, this stuff can't go on. They'll die or help us, be Black or white and dead. I'll save them or kill them."[1]

In his "Experimental Death Unit ⅓1" Baraka portrays a vile, diseased, drunk, forty-year-old whore with drooping stockings, who tries to protect two repugnant white leeches from Black Revolutionary Soldiers, whose motives and actions bewilder her. The revolutionaries kill her and she falls, Baraka writes, "terribly surprised, ignorant."[2] While Baraka does not specifically portray her as a mother, he forces us to see this despicable creature in this symbolic role when he has one of his soldiers play the dozens with another whom he accuses. "That bitch looks just like your mother!"[3]

In another play by Baraka, "A Black Mass," with its constant references to the role of the Black woman as mother, a fertile life-

giving force, one of the women, Tiila, is attacked by the horrible white monster who turns Blacks white. She is consequently transformed into an animalistic, white robot-type monster. Because she has been, in Baraka's words, "touched by this foulness,"[4] she must be cast off from her people. She is no longer a person. "She is," rather, as the wise character Nasafi indicates, "the void. The evil of blank cold licking the stars."[5]

Another young Black writer, Jimmy Garrett, wrote a play in which a young Black revolutionary is dying, but he does not wish to see his mother because he knows that having eaten of the apple of the tree of white American society, she uses her strength to emasculate her men. Nonetheless, the mother comes to him, and like Baraka's mother, she is too old to understand the militancy of Black youths and dismayed at their willingness to die for their freedom. She preaches instead love, religion, and respect for the white man, whom she would have her son emulate. Unable to accept this apple, the dying boy vehemently exclaims, "Motherfuck . . . Mama and all them house niggers. Death to the house niggers." Pointing his gun at his mother, he avers, "We're . . . new men, Mama . . . Not niggers. Black men." Then he kills her.[6]

Contrasting with these authors who apparently view the Black woman as a fallen Eve who must be destroyed before she corrupts others, numerous Black writers have paid tribute to the Black mother as a Madonna bringing salvation to her Black children. Such is the tribute recently paid to her by Maya Angelou, who avowed:

> There is a kind of strength that is
> most frightening in Black women.
> It's as if a steel rod runs right
> through her head down to the feet.
> And I believe that we have to thank
> Black women not only for keeping the
> Black family alive, but [also] the white
> family. . . . Because Black women have nursed
> a nation of strangers. For hundreds
> of years, they literally nursed babies
> at their breasts who they knew, when
> they grew up, would rape their daughters and kill their sons.[7]

George Jackson has written, "The Black woman has in the past few hundred years been the only force holding us [the Black race] together and holding us up."[8]

When Black novelists have attempted the epic of their race, they have chosen the Black woman as the symbol of her people. In his saga of the Black race in America, Ernest J. Gaines has chosen Miss Jane Pittman as his Everyman—or should I say Everywoman? It is she who suffers the indignities of slavery; sets out on the quest for freedom; embodies the unfulfilled dreams, the suffering, the bitter struggles, the endurance, and the strength of her people; and who finally overcomes. Margaret Walker's Vyry in *Jubilee* also fulfills the role of a Black Everyman, though she lacks the strength of character and the broader vision of Miss Jane Pittman.

How, then, can we reconcile these antithetical views of the Black American mother? Is she a destructive Eve offering the poisonous apple or a Madonna bringing hope and salvation? Actually the paradox is not so great as these contrasting versions I have presented suggest. The writers who have dealt the Black mother a death blow as a dangerous Eve have, I believe, condemned her mainly for one sin—the emasculation of the Black man. If I may be permitted a bit of levity here I might suggest that this might at first be construed as the typical male tendency to blame women for their own shortcomings as suggested in this account of the creation.

Her Sphere

When wives were quiet unprecedented
In Eden, where that first tree grew
When Eve, that is, was just invented
And even Adam was rather new,
A good idea occurred to Adam,
A theory and a practice too;
"Your sphere," he said, "will be,
dear Madam,
To bear the blame for what I do."[9]

More seriously, it seems to me that these writers in their bitter attacks have been dealing in a symbolic way with only one aspect of

the character of the Black mother and have been calling for the destruction, not of the Black mother, but rather of that aspect of her character that white racist society has forced her to develop—the repression of the spirit and vitality of her Black men, whether as a result of her blind acceptance of the dictates of white American society or her subservience to them. This emasculation of the Black male has been an obnoxious feature of American society from slavery to the present, and the Black mother has been unwillingly forced into the role of accomplice.

It is hardly necessary to recount the emasculating effects of slavery where a Black man could not even legally marry, or if he selected a woman as his wife, could in no way protect her. He had to stand powerless if any white man chose to beat her, abuse her, or take her to his bed. His children could be taken from him and sold at the will of his white slaveowner. He himself could be snatched away from his family at any moment, and sold like any chattel of the field. The despair and hopelessness he faced in these and similar degrading situations have been poignantly recorded by many former slaves in any number of slave narratives. The kind of psychological emasculation and dependence developed in the Black male during slavery continued after emancipation. This economic system denied him the opportunity to compete with white men for the kinds of jobs that would bring pride and relegated him to degrading tasks or total unemployment. For the ordinary Black man the same situation too often exists even today, and if his despair at his inability to fulfill his role as father and provider doesn't drive him away from home, the welfare laws will.

Because the Black man has historically been stripped by society of his authority, pride, and manhood, the Black woman has naturally been forced to assume a dominant role. It is she who has often been faced with the tasks not only of providing for her children but of shaping their characters and preparing them to live in this American society. As Doctors Grier and Cobbs point out in their perceptive psychological study of the Black psyche, accurately titled *Black Rage,* "This is every mother's task. But the Black mother has a more ominous message for her child and feels more urgently the need to get the message across The child must know that the white world is dangerous and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him."[10] Thus at every point in her

child's development, the Black mother, cognizant of the slave master, the lynch mob, the present-day legal system, had to teach her child to mask and repress his normal masculinity and aggressiveness lest these put his life in danger. She had in other words to prepare him for his subordinate place in the world.

That Black sons often interpreted a mother's repression as a lack of love and developed hostility toward their mothers for inhibiting them is a psychological fact, but that their mother's repression saved them is also a fact—an unattractive reality of American life. Without that repression, this country's lynching statistics would be even more horrifying and our mental institutions would be even more crowded. If their mothers had not prepared them for the abnormal role forced upon them in American society, particularly in the South, many would have either been killed or lost their sanity. That a man could not walk into the southern Jim Crow system without a great deal of psychological preparation was attested to by New York author James Baldwin. Though he knew what to expect, he found in his first trip South that he was not psychologically prepared to deal with the insults and the humiliations without making the wrong step or wrong response that might jeopardize his life. The fear and tension of experiencing the life which Black Southerners daily endured thrust him into a complete collapse when he got back to New York, a collapse he described as a paralyzing "retrospective terror."[11]

And yet, despite the historical necessity for the Black mother's repression of her offspring, young Black boys have never understood her behavior until later, and this has had a profound psychological effect on the relationship between them and their parents. This may be seen in an incident which actually occurred in the life of Black novelist John Oliver Killens. The deep-rooted effect it had on him is attested to by the fact that he has written and rewritten the incident, both in autobiographical sketches and in fiction. In the novel *Youngblood,* Robby beats some white boys who were attempting to rape his sister. The sheriff naturally arrests the Black boy, for Blacks must never hit whites—regardless of the circumstances, and, of course, in any legal conflicts Blacks were automatically guilty. The mother is called to jail and given an ultimatum. Robby will be charged with assault and sent to the reformatory or she must beat him with a whip in front of white

men. The mother, realizing the horrors of Black reformatories in the South, is thus forced to beat her son's naked back until it bleeds. The humiliation the boy feels in the presence of these whites and the hatred he feels toward his mother tear her heart to pieces, and the distraught mother realizes that whites are not only cruel to Blacks, they actually "turn your own children against you."[12]

Innumerable incidents of this nature abound in Black literature —of the Black boy who is punished for fighting whites, no matter what the provocation. Richard Wright recounts a similar incident in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," in which he fought back when attacked by whites who left a long gash in his neck that required three stitches; instead of offering sympathy, his mother beat him and lectured him in "Jim Crow Wisdom," warning him that "I was never, never, under any circumstances, to fight *white* folks again."[13]

A novel whose main thesis deals with the effect of living in white American society on the relationship of a Black mother and her children is John A. Williams' *Sissie,* titled after the dominating mother whose memory haunts her children's lives. As her two children, Ralph and Iris, relive their childhood on their way to Sissie's deathbed, they both feel a great deal of hostility and animosity—even hatred—for their Black mother. But Ralph finally reaches some kind of understanding and says to his sister, "Don't be too hard on her—she was strong in her way, stronger than any of us will ever be. I think she has to be."[14] Then later, considering his mother's love, he says, "Love? What is that? Giving love to children was a luxury she couldn't afford and when she could, she had got out of the habit. I don't mean that she didn't *have* the feeling. Love? You know, that's whipping the crap out of your children so that they don't crack their heads against the walls that make up the labyrinth, and if they don't they might live and make out somehow. That's a kind of love, isn't it . . . ?"[15]

That is indeed a kind of love—the deepest and strongest kind— the kind that must require a mother to hide her natural emotions and punish her child to save him; the kind that allows her to see the horrors that await her child in the northern ghettos and the southern race belts and still face that difficult task of teaching him to survive in them. Baldwin says of his mother, who raised them

in a Harlem ghetto, "She was a very tough little woman, and she must have been scared to death all the years she was raising us." Further, he adds, "I think she saved us all" (the nine children).[16]

Indeed from a historical perspective the Black American mother emerges as a strong woman who, though she had from her beginnings in this country suffered rape, humiliation, and despair, has nonetheless successfully and continuously faced the difficult task of supporting and maintaining her children *and* preparing them to cope with the world, *and* to succeed in it. Unquestionably it is this—her love, her strength, her endurance, her ability to survive in the most ignominious circumstance—that has made possible the new militant who sometimes fails to appreciate the Black mother's role and many too hastily condemn her as a hated Aunt Jemima. He fails to appreciate her strength and endurance which are so necessary to the victory he desires and toward which she has been moving and moving him all along.

Many Black authors suggest the lack of understanding that has led youthful militants to reject the strength that lies behind the Black woman's apparent docility in certain instances. This is humorously treated in Douglas Turner Ward's *Happy Ending,* where the young nephew spurns his two motherly aunts because of their apparent love of and concern for their white folks. He accuses them of having no race pride and exclaims, "Never have I been so humiliated in all my life."[17] It turns out, however, that this young man's fine clothes, his delectable food, his comfortable home, and his generally prosperous way of life have been procured as a direct result of their apparent "bonuses" that make their lives comfortable—*bonuses* meaning the extra benefits they swindle from their employer. As a result of the nephew's new awareness, there is a happy ending in which he pays tribute to his "cagey aunts."[18] A similar situation is suggested in Ruby C. Saunders' "The Generation Gap." The narrator in the poem is an older Negro in a menial job, but one who always took up for "Colored" men, including Rap Brown, and one who keeps up with what "whitey" is doing. The poem concludes:

I don't wear my hair all nappy
Don't throw my fists up in the air
I can't wear them African garments
On my subway job no how.

But I knows that
You's in colleges and schools
All over this land
Got good jobs and houses, senators,
Congressmen, the vote . . . plans!
Now just because this is so
And the white folks calls you news
Remember, . . . Tom . . . and . . . Aunt Jemima
Bent low to pay your dues.[19]

A similar appreciation of the role of the apparently unaware mother in laying the foundation for the forming of the more race-conscious and political contemporary Black is seen in Carolyn Rodgers' poem "It Is Deep," when she cautions, "don't never forget the bridge that you crossed over on." She goes on to picture the strong and loving mother, who, though unaware of the new Black pride and contemporary militant leaders, is nonetheless one who has "waded through a storm" and paved the way for her child.[20]

Indeed as we look back over the history of the Black American mother, we see that she emerges as a strong Black bridge that we all crossed over on, a figure of courage, strength, and endurance unmatched in the annals of world history. She is unquestionably a Madonna, both in the context of being a savior and in terms of giving birth and sustenance to positive growth and advancement among her people. It is she who has given birth to a new race; it is she who has played a major role in bringing a race from slavery and submission to manhood and assertiveness. It is largely because of her that we can look back on the past with pride and look forward to the future with courage.

NOTES

1. LeRoi Jones, *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 87.
2. Ibid., p. 15.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 36.
5. Ibid., p. 37.
6. Jimmy Garrett, "We Own the Night," in LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968), p. 540.

7. Maya Angelou, quoted in *Jet*, 45 (December 13, 1973), p. 48.
8. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geohegan, 1970), p. 24.
9. Alice Miller, *Women Are People* (New York: n.p., 1917), p. 52.
10. William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 61.
11. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972), p. 57.
12. John Oliver Killens, *Youngblood* (New York: Trident, 1975), p. 211. Writing of a similar incident in his own life, Killens comments: "every Black American must learn . . . that he has no inalienable right to defend himself from attack by Mister Charley . . . the cruelest aspect of this story is how they used Black mothers to drive this lesson home." See John Oliver Killens, *Black Man's Burden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), pp. 104–5.
13. Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), p. 4.
14. John W. Williams, *Sissie* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963), pp. 38–39.
15. Ibid., p. 41.
16. James Baldwin, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin," an interview, in C. W. E. Bigsby, ed., *The Black American Writer* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), Vol. 1, 211–12.
17. Douglas Turner Ward, in William Couch, Jr., ed., *New Black Playwrights* (New York: 1971), p. 33.
18. Ibid., p. 46.
19. Ruby C. Saunders, in Orde Coombs, ed., *We Speak as Liberators*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), p. 165. Quoted by permission of the author.
20. Carolyn Rodgers, in Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier, eds., *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), Vol. 2, 780–81.