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## Suffering and the Black Female Narrative in the Twentieth Century

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## The Black Female Narrative

Adventure, romance, and happiness are not large parts of the stories Black women tell. If we had to name ten mainstream literary novels released in the last 50 years that featured Black women central to the plot — and included the aforementioned themes — we would be hard-pressed to find them. Though there are real life accounts of love, joy, and adventure in the lives of Black women, why do we see these life experiences documented sparingly? In the stories written by and for Black women, where can Black female readers find joy in their history and culture without elements of grave sacrifice, abuse, and injustice? Though these instances of suffering do not account for all of the literary experiences of Black women, we cannot ignore that this theme is prevalent in literature written by them. Suffering, specifically instances of personal and bodily sacrifice, physical and sexual assault, and mental dissolution, it's clear that these characteristics are the foundations of what makes Black female narratives unique and impactful. In this paper I will argue that suffering is a central and irrevocable theme of the twentieth-century Black female narrative by examining the works of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. These two novels embody the essence of suffering in Black female narratives and are integral in the conversation surrounding Black women's experiences and womanhood.

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* tells the story of Dana, a time traveller and married Black woman living in California during the year 1976. In nineteenth century Maryland she crosses paths with Rufus, a ruthless plantation owner. The physical and mental demands of time travel are almost incomparable to the extreme physical abuse Dana is subjected to as an enslaved woman on the plantation, where Butler also illustrates the physical and sexual abuse of Black

women. Like Dana, Janie Crawford's experiences in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* mirror the many injustices Black women endure. Hurston takes readers on a journey through Janie's many complicated marriages, sacrifices, and road to self-discovery. Though both characters endure the imaginable, they do receive a reprieve by the end of their respective novels, but not before experiencing extreme hurt and pain.

Writers like Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, and Octavia Butler created stories that illustrated the lives of Black women in an America that was just realizing the complexities of Black womanhood. In each author's novel we are met with strong Black women who, despite their determination to live free of constraint, are confined in a world that strips them of economic and professional opportunities based on skin color and gender. In navigating these struggles, each author illustrates that suffering is both expected and the basis of life for Black women. We clearly see this in *The Bluest Eye* where Pecola Breedlove's destiny is shaped by the fact that she was born a dark-skinned Black female. These are the factors Pecola's community uses to assess her value as "less than," which results in the verbal, physical, and sexual abuse she endures throughout the novel.

In the nineties, *Push* by Sapphire and *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sista Souljah further illustrate issues of abuse and mistreatment of Black women with even more visceral storytelling. Their novels come after the Civil Rights Movement, the third wave of feminism, and the rise of greater Black representation in mainstream media. Nonetheless, in *Push*, we meet Precious, a teenager who, much like Pecola Breedlove, is subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse because she dark-skinned and obese. Precious is beaten and sexually assaulted by her parents, becomes a teen mother to two children, and also becomes HIV positive by the end of her story.

Again, further illustrations of suffering are repeated: *The Coldest Winter Ever* tells the story of Winter Santiago, the daughter of a drug kingpin whose world is ultimately shattered when her father is arrested and his drug empire is dissolved. Winter must then navigate complicated and hyper-sexually charged relationships with men and the foster system only to land in jail.

Sapphire and Souljah's approach to their characters forces audiences to ponder why Black women must experience a womanhood that is plagued with trauma. What's more concerning is as in the novels before them, suffering remains a staple in the Black female narrative; from Zora Neale Hurston's work to *Sistah Souljah*, we see that the struggles Black women experience have not changed since the publication of Hurston and Butler's novels.

In order to discuss how suffering functions in the Black female narrative, we must discuss race and how racial issues in America mold the lives of Black women. Racism and sexism are the source of suffering for Black women and are just two aspects of the injustice Dana and Janie face. Black women's oppression began when enslaved Africans were stolen from their countries and brought to America. This spawned uniquely American issues where Black women were violated on the basis of politics, misplaced sexual desire, and racist ideologies. To give context to all of this, I'd like to pay specific attention to Black women in the areas of labor, race, and gender.

Stolen labor, knowledge, and skills are what paint Black women as workers first and people second. The idea that Black women can only be valuable while they're working (and are expected to sacrifice their time and personal passions while doing so) is not a foreign concept but a common and accepted belief. In *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins, she states that the "convergence of race, class, and gender characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all

subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another” (6)<sup>1</sup>.

To Hill’s point, Black women’s labor is viewed as an extension of their existence as opposed to a job they can separate themselves from. During slavery, Black women were either forced to work in fields or in the home of their enslaver. Some women were expected to perform land duties while others were designated as cooks and maids. Other Black women were expected to breastfeed the children of their enslavers while their own were either killed or sold off. The pattern we are seeing here is that Black women’s worth was determined by whether they could perform tasks (and perform tasks well) for the benefit of their enslaver. We see this clearly in *Kindred* where Dana is only deemed useful because she can read and write, unlike her enslaver, Rufus. Dana is aware of medical practices not yet known to those in the nineteenth century, and is able-bodied enough to assist other enslaved women with domestic tasks. Her life on the Weylin plantation revolves around Rufus and the work he needs her to perform; to him, Dana is a valuable asset because of the labor he forces her to provide. This is succinctly summarized by Hill: “[Enslaved women’s] forced incorporation into a capitalist and political economy as slaves meant that West African women became economically exploited, politically powerless units of labor” (56).

As mentioned, race also greatly impacts the experiences of Black women. The nuances of race as defined by American history and culture largely affects how Black womanhood is perceived in America. It also defines how Black women are treated. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, author of *African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race*

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<sup>1</sup> Hill also states, “African-American women’s oppression has encompassed three interdependent dimensions. First, the exploitation of Black women’s labor essential to U.S. capitalism...[and the denial] of rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens” (7).

writes, “The social context for this construction of race as a tool for Black oppression is historically rooted in the context of slavery” (256). Higginbotham mentions Sojourner Truth’s “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” as a “racialized configuration of gender.” Sojourner Truth’s question begs another: how does one’s blackness determine rules of womanhood and gender expectations? In an attempt to answer this question, we must first realize an important contradiction. Much of the Black woman’s experience is built on the notion that they aren’t women at all — thus, womanhood for Black women is non-existent in the eyes of the oppressor. Black women are seen as male laborers who are capable of performing the same strenuous duties as Black men. For context, viewing Black women as men makes it easy for their oppressors to further disassociate them from their femininity and abuse them. If we think back to forced labor during slavery, we can see how Black women working the land were perceived as “doing men’s work.” The insinuation that Black women were manly figures negated any chance of Black women receiving the same dignity, respect, and protection afforded to White women at the moment of their birth. The difference here is that White women have the opportunity to be seen as human beings, which provides them the chance to navigate the world as such. Though White women also face their own struggles based on gender, they are never separated from their womanhood in the way Black women often are.

When Black women’s womanhood is recognized in the context of slavery, it’s mostly for the purposes of childcare or rape. Higginbotham expands on this: “for black and white women, gendered identity was reconstructed and represented in very different...racialized contexts” (258). There were virtually no protections for enslaved women who were sexually assaulted. Higginbotham cites the case of Celia, a young woman who had been subjected to constant forced

sexual interactions by her enslaver, Robert Newsome. When she killed him in self-defense, she was charged with murder in the first-degree. Her counsel wanted to argue self-defense citing “Missouri statutes [that] protected Missouri women from attempts [of] ...rape” (258), but similar statutes during that time used terms such as “white women”, “negro”, and “slave” to categorize the different types of women who could actually be protected by these laws. Despite her defense’s efforts, Celia was found to be exempt from such protections and was hanged after being found guilty of murder in the first-degree.

Back to our earlier question of how blackness determines the rules of womanhood and gender expectations, we can answer that by simply saying that Black people have always been viewed as a commodity in an effort to uphold White supremacy. When one is perceived as *something* that can be bought, sold, and (quite literally) worked to death, value is then placed on what one can provide and not who they are as a person. To be a valued member of society is an experience that does not exist for Black women because they are denied the opportunity to illustrate their value outside of labor — this has been the case for hundreds of years. Despite progress that has been made since the Civil Rights Movement, Black women are still fighting to be valued, especially in today's world where their pay is sixty-one cents on the dollar compared to White men. As such, womanhood and gender roles for Black women can only be defined by how they are viewed due to their Blackness first and foremost.

### **Is Black Male Privilege a Myth?**

When discussing the suffering in Black female narratives, it’s important to ask, “Where do Black men fit into this theme?” This question must be addressed when discussing suffering and how it illustrates Black women’s oppression. I firmly believe that while Black men also live



under a state of oppression, its form takes a much different shape than the one we see play out in stories by, for, and about Black women. As a result, though Black men in literature suffer, they most certainly do not suffer in the same way Black female characters often do. Additionally, Black male characters play a role in the victimization of Black women by exercising their own power and privilege over them.

In order for it to be true that Black men hold privilege, it must also be true that Black men hold some sort of power (though limited), even in a world that prevents Black men from holding power on a systemic level. This is something that T. Hasan Johnson, author of *Challenging the Myth of Black Male Privilege*, would strongly disagree with<sup>2</sup>. Johnson states that Black male privilege is a “concept” made popular by Black gender discourse; Johnson centers his argument on the idea that Black women claim to be more oppressed, thus invalidating the experiences of Black men. Johnson additionally argues that “[Black male privilege], if genuine, should be detectable by material standards and thus be empirically measurable” (21). To support this claim, Johnson discusses the ways Black men cannot be privileged:

Black males are generally at the worst end of the spectrum in areas that range from in utero complications, circumcision, police violence, fatherhood family absence, gendered violence, high school and college graduation rates, health, drugs/alcohol addiction, gendered income gaps, unemployment, police/vigilante brutality, homelessness, male abuse, gendered rape, incarceration, rape/sexual assault, life expectancy, suicide, military service, and many more. (22)

Johnson fails to realize that privilege doesn’t inherently mean that one must possess great economic wealth in order to be labeled as such. Privilege is attained by people of all races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most important, the suffering and oppression of Black

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<sup>2</sup> This is not a mainstream opinion or full representation on the ideology surrounding Black male privilege and gender in academia. However, Johnson’s argument is a popular counterargument seen in cultural discussions regarding the relationship between Black men and women, in addition to the experiences of Black women in comparison to Black men. As a result, his argument is important to address.

women does not negate the existence of suffering and oppression for Black men. Rather, while both groups experience similar forms of oppression under white supremacy, the fact will always remain that men and women will simply experience oppression differently on the basis of gender. When you take into account other gendered groups outside of Black men and women (Black trans women and non-binary people, for example), a case can also be made that both black men and women have privilege over these groups within their community who are persecuted even further based on their gender identity in addition to their race.

Again, who suffers the most or who is at the “worst end of the spectrum” does not matter — what matters, and what makes oppression for Black women unique, is that it stems from *both* systemic racism and subjugation by Black men. Referring to Hurston’s novel, it’s clear that Janie’s experience as a woman is shaped by Black men who are made to feel inferior by white supremacy. To maintain any semblance of masculinity and to take back whatever power they’ve lost, they must be able to control something or someone. This doesn't discount the larger issues surrounding racial oppression, but does illustrate how the effects of racial oppression give way to further forms of ill treatment within the Black community.

### **Exploring Suffering in Black Female Narratives**

There are three specific elements within the theme of suffering in Black female narratives: physical violation, mental deterioration, and the act of sacrifice. Suffering can be defined as the state of pain or distress. In addition to that, and in the context of Hurston and Butler’s work it can be furthered defined as a tool to illustrate the history of Black women.

### *Sexual Assault*

The sexual assault of Black women ensures their powerlessness for the benefit of their perpetrators who are mostly men, Black and White. *Kindred's* Alice for example, is an enslaved woman who is robbed of many choices, specifically the choice of who she allows to love her and who she consents to sexual intimacy with. In a scene where Alice's husband, Isaac, fights Rufus after he rapes Alice, it's clear that Isaac is fighting to protect his wife while Rufus is fighting to maintain ownership of Alice, a woman he claims to love. Alice says, "[Rufus] ...got to where he wanted to be more friendly than I did...He tried to get Judge Holman to sell Isaac South to keep me from marrying him" (119). Alice's love and sexual attraction to her husband is the source of Rufus' contempt for her; to Dana he says, "When we were little, we were friends. We grew up. She got so she'd rather have a buck nigger than me" (123). Rufus' anger over Alice deliberately not choosing him as a mate is a direct attack against his manhood and the power he possesses<sup>3</sup>. Referring to the abuse she endures at the hands of Rufus, Alice says, "My stomach just turns every time he puts his hands on me!" to which Butler adds, "But she endures" (180). By repeatedly violating Alice, Rufus illustrates how Black female characters are rendered powerless through the constant attacks on their bodies.

A Black woman who has freedom is a direct threat against White men<sup>4</sup> who gain their power and sense of self from the oppression of others, and Black men who want to recover and maintain their sense of masculinity under the same oppressive system that exploits Black women. To be clear, the sexual violence we see happen to Black female characters is rarely ever

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<sup>3</sup> This later drives Rufus to have Isaac's ears cut off before he is sold to another plantation. Afterward, with Isaac no longer there to physically hold Rufus accountable for his actions, he continuously rapes and beats Alice — the abuse results in two children.

<sup>4</sup> White men in the context of slavery from the seventeenth century until the late nineteenth century.

about sexual gratification, but about power. The rationale of the sexual violation of Black women in the context of slavery is discussed in Helen A. Neville and Jennifer Hamer's article, "*We Make Freedom*": *An Exploration of Revolutionary Black Feminism*. They cite the image of the Jezebel (sexually charged women) as a large reason why sexual violence against Black women was both excused and welcomed by enslavers. They state, "the logic was that Black women could not be raped because they were always desirous of and enjoyed sexual intercourse...[this] denies Black women the status of victim [and] denies the injuries resulting from these assaults" (455). This is something we clearly see with Alice; Rufus mistakes his own sexual attraction for Alice and her kindness towards him as her own sexual feelings. He uses the fact that she is enslaved as an excuse to violate her. To other enslaved Blacks on the Weylin plantation, Alice is not a victim, but a woman who is using her body to gain better treatment from the plantation owner. As Hamer and Neville mention, the misidentification of rape as consensual sex is precisely what prevents Black women from being seen as victims.

Another important aspect of this violence would be the "reluctance among among many whites to acknowledge and respond to racial injustice" (33)<sup>5</sup>. There would also have to be recognition that rape is inherently immoral when it involves any kind of victim; acknowledging that rape is immoral implies that one believes the victim to be either human and of value by default. Painting the rape of Black women as consensual or desired on the part of the woman purposefully prevents further analysis into why it was acceptable for Black women to be subjected to rape. Furthermore, the rape of White women —especially during the time period

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<sup>5</sup> *Violating the Black Body: Sexual Violence in Truman Capote's 'Other Voices, Other Rooms'*, Thomas Fahy

that *Kindred* is set — is universally condemned<sup>6</sup> and seen as an attack that directly threatens the power of White men. When their power is threatened, White men are more inclined to seek justice or retribution on behalf of White women.

Sexual violence in Hurston's novel has stifling effects on the sexual spirit of her female characters. The idea of sexual violence as a generational trauma, for example, is illustrated through Leafy and Nanny. Both Janie and Leafy are products of rape, walking proof of the crime committed against their mothers. Having this information provides readers with context as to why, given Nanny's history with sexual violence, she pushes Janie into a marriage with Logan Killicks once she discovers Janie's sexual curiosity. Nanny would rather have Janie safe in an environment where her sexual experiences are confined in the space of a marriage. As Janie sees with her first two husbands, sex and sexuality is not something to be explored — it's simply an experience that isn't passionate, loving, or romantic.

### ***Non-Sexual Battery***

Non-sexual battery is the second aspect of physical violence Black women experience in both novels. Like sexual assault, this type of violence works to subdue and control the female characters who experience it. Outside of maintaining power structures, however, one important difference between the sexual assault and the beatings we see these women experience is that the beatings work to quell the insecurities of the men conducting these punishments.

For Janie, when she experiences abuse at the hands of Joe, we can see this as a demonstration of his beating Janie into submission. The first instance of domestic violence begins when Janie inadvertently undercooks Joe's dinner. As Joe sees it, the woman's place in

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<sup>6</sup> The only exception to this would be rape apologists who believe that all women, no matter their race, are deserving of sexual assault due to them simply being women.

the home is the kitchen where she dutifully works to feed her husband. Hurston writes, “Joe had looked forward to his dinner as a refuge from other things.” (67). When he discovers that Janie has ruined his meal, he hits her. This act is not done because Joe feels that he as a husband has been slighted. It’s done because Joe as a man is angry that his wife cannot properly perform the one important task that she should be able to execute as a woman. Her failure to do so is a direct affront to Joe’s expectations of her and what he’s trained her to do up to this point. To teach her to listen and follow directions, Joe decides that hitting Janie is a better method to get the message across. This plainly defines the power dynamic in their marriage, and if Janie hadn’t realized before who held the control, she becomes absolutely aware of it afterward.

As the novel progresses, Joe’s abuse of Janie is a response to her exposure of his shortcomings. After receiving another routine insult from Joe publicly in their store, she confronts him stating, “Stop mixin’ up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin’ me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not” (74). Janie continues, delivering a blow strong enough to emasculate Joe and deflate his ego: “When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change of life” (75). Having publicly revealed Joe’s impotency to the other men in their community, his masculine image has been ruined. Janie’s words dismantles every idea of what it means to be a powerful man in society; by exposing the fact that his genitals cannot be used for sexual pleasure, Joe has been reduced to nothing. The only appropriate response he can muster is to slap Janie as if this assault will somehow reassemble his broken ego and sense of self.

Whereas Joe’s beatings are centered in his fragile ego and public perception of his identity, Tea Cake’s beatings stem from his own apprehensions regarding his place as an

exemplar husband in his marriage. As Tea Cake sees it, Janie's status as the widow of Joe Starks elevates her prestige; being the widow of a powerful man makes any suitor that comes afterward eager to fill Joe's shoes, which is evident from Tea Cake's overwhelming appreciation of Janie. Her status as a financially independent woman after her husband's death further raises her prominence and desirability as a partner; holding the financial power, Janie shifts power away from her husband because she doesn't *need* Tea Cake. When his worthiness and role as Janie's husband is questioned by a woman who believes Janie should instead marry a lighter man with greater financial prowess, Tea Cake beats Janie: "Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside of him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (140).

The idea that a man must own a woman is apparent with Rufus' character as well. Not only does he own Dana, Rufus also has a toxic dependence on her<sup>7</sup>. We see this same toxicity between Janie and Tea Cake as well; though Rufus owns Dana as her enslaver, Tea Cake "owns" Janie as her husband. Rufus dependency on Dana, however, is tied to labor; Dana's education level, marriage, and life in the twentieth century threatens Rufus' idea that Dana belongs only to him. Most importantly, Dana's time travelling abilities create more possibilities for Dana to escape at any moment without Rufus. Any small hint of Dana leaving him absolutely threatens the security he works hard to maintain. When she decides to run away from the Weylin plantation, she is whipped, by Rufus' father<sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>7</sup> Dana has a unique position on the Weylin plantation; because she is educated (and even more educated than the Weylin's themselves), Rufus uses Dana as his guide and transcriber being that he cannot read or write well. He only fully appreciates her knowledge and abilities when they work in his favor.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Weylin (or simply Weylin) has had a strong dislike for Dana since her arrival on the plantation. Rufus often threatens Dana with the possibility of being whipped by Weylin, never whipping Dana himself. In this instance, he makes good on his threat, allowing Dana to be beaten until bloodied and bruised by his father.

They took me to a barn and tied my hands and raised whatever they had tied them to high over my head....Weylin ripped my clothes off and began to beat me. He beat me until I tried to make myself believe he was going to kill me. (176)

Even knowing that he needs Dana on a daily basis to perform his bidding, Rufus would rather order Dana to be beaten within an inch of her life and unable to work than have her away from his watchful eye. We then get to a point in *Kindred* where Rufus finally hits Dana himself. Until this moment, Rufus used threats and manipulation to subdue her. When he sees eventually that verbal punishment is not enough, he pushes himself to punish her physically. This is a turning point for Rufus as we see him shift from a man who has other people dole out his violent deeds to being the one who carries out the violence himself. When Dana prevents Rufus from disciplining an enslaved woman on the plantation, he slaps her publicly and demands that she “[gets] in the house and [stays] there.” Doing this publicly not only confirms Rufus’ control, but ensures that other women take his abuse of Dana as an example. Desperate to escape, Dana cuts her wrists to initiate time travel back to the future.

### ***Mental Deterioration***

The effects of Rufus’ violence has fatal and near-fatal consequences for the women on his plantation, and introduces the second characteristic in the theme of suffering: mental deterioration. Dana’s self-harm act in an attempt to escape is not an isolated incident on the Weylin plantation. In particular, suicide is a direct result of Rufus’ violent and manipulative tendencies. At one point, Alice says to Dana, “He’ll never let any of us go. The more you give [Rufus], the more he wants” (234). Since the selling of her husband to another plantation, Alice is subjected to several nights of physical and sexual abuse; to Rufus, she presents herself as a woman who is consenting to the relationship though, in reality, she suffers greatly. Rufus often



uses their children's welfare against Alice to force her compliance but eventually sends their children away from the plantation after Alice attempts to escape. As a result, Alice commits suicide by hanging herself from a tree<sup>9</sup>. In a reaction to her death, one of the enslaved women comments, "The whipping didn't matter much. But when [Rufus] took away her children, I thought she was go' die right there. She was screaming and crying and carrying on. Then she got sick and I had to take care of her" (250). Alice becoming ill after her children were sent away suggests she became severely depressed before committing suicide.

From the instant Alice reaches adulthood, Rufus makes it his mission to control and subdue her, isolating Alice from many of the enslaved men and women on the Weylin plantation. When asked why he had taken her children away, Rufus responds by saying, "To punish her, scare her. To make her see what could happen if she...tried to leave me" (251). Suffocated under his control, she becomes even easier to sympathize with, especially after her death; I would even argue that Alice didn't die simply as a result of her own depression alone, but directly by the hands of Rufus. Having lost her will to endure his abuse, she is driven to depression and is forced to succumb to it. In transitioning from a rebellious and spirited woman at the start of the novel to a defeated woman by the end, Alice becomes a prime example of how Black female characters are often driven to the darkest depths of their minds and sorrow. Alice in her suicide and mental deterioration, is reminiscent to Pecola Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye* who becomes mentally unstable after enduring years of abuse. The function of mental deterioration within suffering serves as one of two "last stops" for many Black women in these stories. When enduring

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<sup>9</sup> William D. Pierson, author of *White Cannibals White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves* writes, "Many [slaves] committed suicide under a depressed mental state bought on by a sense of loss and separation exacerbated by the hopelessness of what seemed like an increasingly harsh regime of bondage" (150).

constant waves of grave injustices, these women must either fight their way out of their suffering or succumb to it by the time the novel has ended. Alice is an example of succumbing to her suffering and her “last stop” in the novel is her suicide,

### *Sacrifice*

The act of sacrifice, the third and final characteristic of suffering, is the most impactful phenomenon we see throughout Black female narratives. This is a characteristic that forces Black women to surrender aspects of themselves, be it aspirations, their bodies, or love.

The sacrifice of love and aspirations is apparent in Janie’s case. She finds herself responsible for the insecurities of her husbands at her expense. Worse, she loses her chance at the love she’s always envisioned and is robbed of a peaceful entry to womanhood. Nanny powerfully predicts these sacrifices: “...de white man is de ruler of everything...So de white man throw down the load and tell the nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t take it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world...” (14). Nanny knows that as a black woman looking for love in a world that does not love her back, Janie must look for safety and security in a man, not love, in order to survive. In the effort to attain security Janie is forced to accept a reality — that is loveless and passionless marriage — which does not align with her fantasy. Furthermore, Janie’s introduction to womanhood is not by the sexual pleasure and romance she once envisioned. She does not become a woman simply because of marriage or through the loss of her virginity. Janie becomes a woman once she realizes that marriages do “not make love.” With her idealization of love and romance shattered, it’s *that* moment that initiates Janie into the painful and confusing world of black womanhood

void from any real chance of pure love and sexual freedom without consequence. As a result, she must trade in love for practicality.<sup>10</sup>

Janie's womanhood is entirely shaped by her marriages. An example of this comes from Janie's marriage to Joe where she learns that her silence preserves his ego and keeps her safe (for the most part) from his verbal and physical abuse. Joe's expectation of her as a wife doesn't involve Janie having a voice or opinions; to Joe, womanhood consists of dotting on and dedicating one's life their husband: "...gradually [Janie] pressed her teeth together and learned to hush." (67). She is being taught that womanhood is not what she makes it, but what her husband makes it. This reality places Janie in the exact position Nanny fought hardest to prevent. Hurston documents Janie's predicament using natural images to illustrate the fleeting nature of her relationship's honeymoon phase and the end of her idealistic approach to love: "The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired." (67). This excerpt emphasizes Janie's ultimate sacrifice in her marriage to Joe: the loss of personal fulfillment and agency. Janie has become the mule and she will always have to bear the Black man's burden so long as she is married to one. When Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake to save her own life towards the end of the novel, his death comes as a release from abuse and the demands that come from being a married woman. No longer carrying his burden, Janie has sacrificed love once again to save herself; as a result of her actions, Janie has come out on the other side of unimaginable pain and heartbreak as a victorious woman. At the novel's conclusion, we see Janie begin to journey through womanhood for the first time in

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<sup>10</sup> This is with the exception of Tea Cake.

her life on her terms — finally, she experiences a life that will no longer be defined by a husband.

As with Janie, Dana's sacrifices are made out of necessity and the need to survive. For Dana, however, her sacrifice comes at the expense of a limb. Rufus' need to possess Dana is what drives her to make one last attempt to escape the Weylin plantation. In the process of her escape, Dana fatally stabs Rufus. As he dies, and refusing to let Dana go, Rufus holds on to her arm which causes it to be dismembered as she arrives in her present time. Even in his final moments, Rufus believed that if he cannot have Dana no one else should have her at all. His role in her dismemberment illustrates Rufus' inability to relieve himself of the notion that he is entitled to the bodies of Black women, even in death. Furthermore, the loss of her arm is significant because it encapsulates why suffering has permanence in Black female narratives: Black women's journeys have always been about sacrifice. Whether as enslaved women being forced to sacrifice humanity for labor and sexual exploitation, or as wives surrendering their own dreams for the sake of their husband's security, sacrifice is simply a constant. In Dana's case, she could not leave the Weylin plantation with having *only* killed Rufus in order to save herself. The theme calls for women like Dana to sacrifice something of hers to attain what she needs most; in order for readers to feel the full impact of Dana's escape, she is required to lose part of herself in order to gain something better by the novels end.

### **The Role of Black Women Writers in Literature**

Though Black women have been successful in placing their work in circles of mainstream interest, they still encounter trouble holding the same level of importance as their White counterparts in the academic arena. The work of prolific writers such as Toni Morrison,

Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks are still boxed into university level electives and are rarely core parts of class syllabi or school curricula. By this, I mean that work by Black women is not prioritized in classrooms; instead of their novels being integrated into required courses, they're mostly included in courses that students are not required to take. As a note, this is a trend we see with novels written by many marginalized groups, including Black women. Having taken a handful of American Literature courses between my freshman year of highschool and my senior year in college, I had only encountered Toni Morrison's work for the first time in an elective course my junior year of college. In comparison, I had read the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemmingway, and Emily Dickinson several times, sometimes one semester after the other. Simply put, while it is true that Black women writers can occupy a large space in the mainstream literary arena, it can also be true that they hold a very small space in the academic field, especially in the case of Black women writers of the twentieth century. This is supported by Gloria H. Tull where in her work<sup>11</sup> she states, "[Black women] are less known, less taught, less well-taught, less criticized, and more readily dismissed than their male counterparts" (10). Even with more liberally crafted syllabi and changing public opinion of Black women writers and their contributions, the fact still remains that their work is not considered literary canon. This is why I believe it's important to support and write about the works of Black women writers who not only portray the struggles of Black women, but were struggling themselves at some point in their careers. Knowing this puts into perspective how essential they are for Black culture and women.

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<sup>11</sup> *Rewriting Afro-American Literature: A Case for Black Women Writers*

Literary scholar Debroah E. McDowell asks, “what is the relationship of race, gender, and literary voice?”<sup>12</sup> The relationship between these three subjects serve as the ingredients that constitutes most of the Black female narrative. The inclusion of racial and intraracial issues carves out specific — and often traumatic — experiences that create the foundation for Black female narratives. Writing about race and the effects of racism gives great significance to the stories of Black women in America. This is especially significant when, in reality, Black women’s real life history of trauma and subjugation are often ignored by White dominant society or only deemed important within their own communities. In a sense, documenting these experiences makes them “real” by bringing them out into the attention of wider audiences. Gender sharpens this foundation, shedding light on the specific experiences of Black women. It illustrates how oppression is intersectional as we’ve seen in both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Kindred*. Many of the issues Janie and Dana experience happen because they’re Black and women. The last ingredient, literary voice, ties race and gender together. Literary voice can be defined as “the individual style in which a certain author writes his or her works” (Literary Device). In this case, it’s a powerful tool for Black writers to break down traditional stylistic standards and use it to express the voice of their culture; Hurston and Charles W. Chesnutt are examples of this as the dialogue in their work is written in African American dialect. Outside of style, I believe that literary voice allows authors to illustrate how inextricable race and gender are in the stories we read about Black women through dialogue and exposition. It also allows authors to fully encapsulate suffering in these narratives.

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<sup>12</sup> “*The Changing Same*”: *Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists* (283)

McDowell further states, “largely because degraded images of Black women have persisted throughout history, both in and out of literature, Black women novelists have assumed throughout their tradition a revisionist mission aimed at substituting reality for stereotype” (284). Keeping this in mind as we discuss the role of Black women writers, it becomes quite clear that they use the relationship between race, gender, and literary voice to control the images and perceptions of Black women in their work. They are able to create experiences that exist outside of stereotypes, revealing what Black women have known for years: they’re human beings, not objects to be possessed or dominated. Additionally, controlling the images of Black women gives writers the opportunity to provide them with the power of voice. Black women have suffered at the hands of men within their communities and outside of them in silence. They have learned, as we have seen with Janie, Dana, and Alice, that to be a Black woman, one is often stripped of her voice by men who hold the power to do with them as they please. Writers like Hurston and Butler put words to pain, anger, and sadness, providing readers with full the context of Black womanhood and all that comes with it. Moreover, readers are inclined to consider how, if applicable, they themselves have contributed to the oppression of Black women. Ultimately, these writers not only defend Black women, but protect their legacy.

In protecting that legacy, suffering becomes instrumental in ensuring that readers do not remember Black women as stereotypes; it allows writers to flip stereotypes and preconceived notions and reclaim the truth behind them. This is especially true of Alice where Butler makes it clear that the image of the Jezebel has dire effects on Black women’s mental and physical health; Butler breaks this stereotype and replaces it with a woman who has been victimized. Though some feminists would argue that victimization puts Black women at a disadvantage, I would

counter argue that this does the opposite. Seeing Black women as victims allows them to be fragile, not always the strong, stoic, workhorses they are usually stereotypically as. In fact, the theme of suffering allows Black women to liberate themselves from the isolation of suffering in silence. By writing about the pain they endure, Black women writers are telling their audiences, “Yes we feel pain, and yes we deserve to write about it.” Without the illustration of suffering, there would be no room to view Black women as anything else *but* a stereotype. Black women writers are offering Black women a way out of stereotypical portrayals, even if the inclusion of suffering in their work clouds positive experiences Black women go through.

Most of all, the Black female literary tradition can be defined as writers committed to telling stories about Black women and bearing the weight of their trauma in order to elevate their voices to the masses, oftentimes at the expense of placement in literary canon. While some could argue that the re-hashing of suffering devalues Black women’s work, it effectively moves audiences to discover and analyze experiences they otherwise would not have access to. These writers demonstrate the wide spectrum of lived experiences for Black women and they are dedicated to showing readers that Black women are not monoliths. This dedication for them, unlike writers of any other group, works to expose the theme of suffering as a specific trauma rooted in hundreds of years of racial oppression, sexual violence, and misogynoir. If no one else will tell the history and stories of Black women, Black women writers are sure to.

### **The Future of the Black Female Narrative**

With suffering being such an instrumental part of the stories Black women writers tell, it’s difficult to imagine these narratives without it. I believe that suffering will continue to permeate Black women’s culture and journeys. As we usher in the third decade of the



twenty-first century, I predict that the *kinds* of narratives told by Black women will become even more diverse; what today holds that the past did not is the opportunity to represent a wider spectrum of Black women, including those who are not cisgender and heterosexual. We will begin to see larger representation in areas of socioeconomic background, sexuality, and gender identification. Writers and creators like Janet Mock<sup>13</sup> and Lena Waite<sup>14</sup> are prime examples of this. Mock is a Black trans woman who, in her books, documents her experiences being trans, her time as a sex worker, and her current career. Waite is openly gay and represents a group of Black women writers who have been underrepresented until now. These women are just two of the many writers who are transforming the landscape of Black female narratives — they illustrate that writers today are transforming their trauma and experiences into stories of hope, perseverance, and community. They are not ashamed by or tied to their trauma, but recognize that it's necessary in molding their life experiences. The impact of this can be seen in online conversations amongst Black women where now, more than ever, they are encouraging each other to make peace with trauma and prioritize their mental health. This is something acknowledged by Dr. Angela Neal-Barnett, who cites stereotypical portrayals of Black women as a contributing factor to Black women's trauma and urges the importance of therapy, "slowly, the stigma associated with seeking help for anxiety is disappearing. Women have begun to understand that an anxious Black woman is not crazy, she is simply anxious and with assistance can reclaim her life." Though framing the narrative around healing versus trauma is not a new

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<sup>13</sup> Janet Mock is a New York Times bestselling author of *Redefining Realness* (2014) and *Surpassing Certainty* (2017). In addition, she is a feminist activist and writer, director, and producer of the FX original series, *Pose* — a show that documents the experiences of black trans women and gay men of color in the ballroom culture of the 1980's.

<sup>14</sup> Lena Waite is a screenwriter, producer, and actress. She is best known for her work in Netflix's *Master of None* (2015), Showtime's *The Chi* (2018), and is the writer of the new acclaimed film, *Queen & Slim* (2019).

concept in Black women's writing, it's more apparent in recent creations and cultural conversations amongst Black women.

Now more than ever, technology has greatly impacted how Black women communicate their suffering. With access to millions of people across the globe, they share their experiences of Black womanhood on social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr. These sites have become tools that empower Black women to become writers of their own individual narratives outside of the literary arena. I would even argue that social media posts have become the new, primary venue for this narrative. With social media, there are no pressures to appeal to a certain audience or reply on publishers and literary agents to make their experiences heard. Moreover, social media has allowed for immediate awareness of the many instances of suffering different kinds of Black women are experiencing. I recall the deaths of Muhlaysia Booker, Claire Legato, and Michelle Washington, all Black trans women murdered in 2019; they are part of the twenty-two trans women killed this year alone. In addition, suffering as a result of systemic oppression has not only persisted, but evolved; we can take a look at the murders of Sandra Bland and Attatiana Jefferson at the hands of the police. Their deaths have added to the conversation around Black women and the growing issue of police brutality in America. If we can learn anything from Dana, Alice, and Janie, it's that suffering is a lingering shadow on the lives of Black women. However, we can also say now that there is a much larger international community of Black women and writers who recognize this and fight tooth and nail to ensure that Black women remain visible, heard, and at the helm of their own stories.

## **Reflecting on Hurston and Butler**

As we move forward into the future of Black female narratives, I would like to close by reflecting on the work of the past and how it points to a brighter future. Through their work, Hurston and Butler illustrate the deep importance that suffering has in Black female narratives. Suffering demands that Black women endure, sacrifice, and bear their own trauma in addition to the trauma of others. Ultimately, these novels are a dedication to the many Janie's, Dana's, and Alice's of this world who have fought silent battles for their own agency, oftentimes unacknowledged. The conclusion of these novels offers these characters a reprieve from the struggles they've had to endure. Additionally, it offers a sense of escape for readers who are dealing with similar traumas. Even more so, these novels urge readers to acknowledge the significance of pain in these works and how they may have internalized their own. It offers readers room for reflection and meditation on their own traumas and healing journeys. Though suffering is certainly not a beacon of light in the world of Black female narratives, it is a theme that has placed itself at the forefront of Black women's work and has proven itself to be a concept that is forever intertwined in the stories of, for, and by Black women. As we continue to move forward in the literary world, I welcome a more diverse era of writers who represent the spectrum that is female Blackness. Hurston and Butler (in addition to many other iconic writers like Toni Morrison) laid the foundation for what is impactful, relevant, and groundbreaking for stories about Black women in the literary world. I firmly believe that the next generation of writers will continue to build on that foundation, carrying on the tradition of bringing Black women's stories to the masses.

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