

RACE, GENDER AND GENRE IN BARBARA NEELY'S *BLANCHE* AMONG THE TALENTED TENTH

ANGKAYARKAN VINAYAKA SELVI¹ & CECILIA MARY.S²

¹Assistant Professor, Department, of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, India

²Research Scholar, Department, of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, India

ABSTRACT

The proposed paper intends to critically analyze the prominent issues of race, gender and genre in the mystery writing of Barbara Neely. The chosen text is a prominent political and creative space that subverts the stereotypical notions attached to black women. The writer uses the voice and experiences of a black female domestic worker Blanche White against intra-racial attitudes of African American society. The writings of Barbara Neely could be treated as a multifold record of detection, racism and women's oppression. She proves that any genre could be used to fulfill the predicament of African American writers and genre and plot as pretexts used for the empowerment of any marginalized group.

KEYWORDS: Mystery Writing, Barbara Neely and African American Women Writings, Genre, Race

INTRODUCTION

Literature relies upon various discourses to understand the definition and condition of women. Feminist theorists view literary texts as documents that operate on power struggle between men and women. Male dominant patriarchal ideology in literary field represents women as object – either as good or evil – such as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives and mothers. Through these representations, the texts naturalize the oppression of women; thus gender is ideologically constructed. Women writers aim at formulating a new language and a new way of writing with intelligence to inscribe their experience, reason, suffering, vision and skepticism. The women's texts suggest alternative expressions to politicize their conditions, desires and experiences.

The connection between gender and genre has played an inevitable role in establishing gender hierarchy. Epic like genres are considered masculine as they treat with the values of heroism, war and adventure as its subject, whereas lyric like genres are more often seen as feminine that expresses private emotions. However, women writers experiment with all genres to assert their intelligence and to establish their feminist concerns; one such genre is detective fiction. During the beginning, detective fiction was considered to be a male domain as it handled with crime, police investigation and judgments. However, the peculiarity of detective genre is that it appeals to both genders. In order to establish the fact that women writers belong to marginalized racial groups experiment with theme specific detective genre as a textual space to inscribe their strategic practices to uplift their race, community and gender, African American women writer Barbara Neely's *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* has been taken as the subject of study for this paper. To analyze the text, its genre and its feminist concerns, it is mandatory to have background knowledge about the diachronic study of detective fiction and as this study deals with African American Women writer, it is important to understand the triply marginalized status of African American Women.

Thus, this paper introduces the definition, origin and development of detective fiction, and the stereotypical images of African American women in section I, and in section II, it takes up the chosen text for close reading. The structure of detective fiction is akin to that of a riddle or a crossword puzzle which has to be solved by the use of analytical capacity and logical deduction with knowledge and guess work. The central character in any detective novel is the detective who always emerges victorious towards the end of the novel. Women detective writers noticeably express the issues of female concerns and it has become an integral part of the history of crime writing. Female detective fiction originated during Victorian period and it established itself as a major genre during twentieth century. It has a long unbroken tradition that consists of god-mothers of crime stories Agatha Christie, Dorothy L.Sayers, and P.D. James and even the rebellious grand-daughters Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Patricia Cornwell.

Nineteenth century detective fiction is frequently seen as traditional and conservative in which the cases are neatly solved and moral orders restored. Female detectives of this period, however, operate their mission subversively. When they solve a case, they re/establish moral certainties and gender role expectations. The first well-known professional detective characters in fictions are Andrew Forrester's, Jr's Mrs. G_, who appeared in the casebook *The Female Detective* in May 1864 and William Stephens Hayward's Mrs. Pascal, which appeared six months later in *The Revelations of a Lady Detective*. Golden Age (1911) female detective fiction is often concerned with human relationships, contemporary social culture, and women's positions. One of the most significant younger women sleuths of this period is Dorothy L.Sayer's Harriet Vane. Female detection has its own genealogy, characteristics and subgenres. The women's crime writings since the early 1980s established its styles in a mixture of "Cozy", "Hard-Boiled", "Forensic", "Humanist", "Gay", "Lesbian", "Ethnic", and "Historical" genres. Women mystery writers have established themselves as authors of crime fiction featuring female protagonists in nontraditional roles. Twenty - first century female detective fictions continue to proliferate into variants and they ensure the continuations of subgenres like cozy that deals with elderly amateur female sleuths; hard-boiled that deals with private investigators, historical female detectives burgeon, and forensic detectives. Three elements prevalent in twenty - first century feminist detective fictions are the construction and representation of female characters, issues relevant to motherhood and finally violence against women. Based on the investigation done on the history of detective fiction, it could be concluded that the feminist detective fictions are taking possible new avatars by interweaving innovative twists in the elements of climax and anticlimax.

Besides characteristic features, subgenres and narrative patterns, detective writings have well known themes of their own. The various themes of mystery genre are serial killers, drug dealers dealing with police corruption, crime capers, adultery, betrayal, ghost towns, sadism, sexual deviance, genocide plots, interracial relations, murder mysteries, family relationship, attorneys, child molestation, repressed memory, gangs and gangster, psychopathic killers, undercover police, people with disabilities, racism, race riots, domestic violence, medical malpractice, vengeance, contemporary life, drug addiction, coming of age, escaped slaves, and stolen histories. African American women writers, who belong to the marginalized group in mainstream American literature, apart from challenging the inherent patriarchal voices and re/channelizing the direction of African American women literature, write more detective fictions representing female detectives. These African American female protagonists do not only solve the crime but also exhibit familiar eccentricities and strengths. African American women mystery writers have made a mark in detective genre. Among them Nikki Baker, the pseudonymous author of a mystery series features black lesbian Virginia Kelly. Eleanor Taylor Bland's mysteries coalesce police procedurals with existing African American themes. Grace Edwards also has written mysteries that feature

savvy female ex-cop Mali Anderson and brought Harlem's working class neighborhood to life. To add more colour to women mystery writing Barbara Neely too has contributed a series of mystery novels.

Generally, African American women writers verbalized their conflicts and emotions to uplift their race and community. Their themes vary from African American history to contemporary culture. Women writers want to break the stereotypical images of black women and to create counter discourses to construct realistic images. Nineteenth and twentieth century stereotypical image of African American women portrayed black women as joyous, naïve, superstitious, ignorant, mammy, sapphire and jezebel. The common stereotypes of black women in the twenty first century are gold digger, independent black woman, and angry black woman. Gold digger image suggests the negative image of a girl appears in pornography videos. The angry black woman is often depicted as dissatisfied and irritated person whereas an independent black woman often infers a narcissistic, ambitious, and financially successful person and she also emasculates black males from her life. Racial stereotypes of strong, super human black women are used as the functional myths in the minds of the readers, allowing them to pay no attention to their humanly qualities. Besides, the white women play their role strategically to maintain and uphold their superior position simultaneously suppressing black women. Thus, black women are positioned collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, and their overall social status is lower than that of any other racial group in America.

Barbara Neely is a novelist, short story writer, feminist, community activist and author of *Blanche White* series of mystery novels. Barbara Neely's writing is a natural outgrowth of her down-to-earth nature and her fierce commitment to political activism. Barbara Neely joins the group of growing number of African American female mystery writers who gain ample audience with their compelling whodunits scenario. Barbara Neely's fictional detective protagonist *Blanche White* and her concerns for human condition can be compared to Langston Hughes's classic character, Jesse B. Semple.

Barbara Neely, like Walter Mosley has written a series of novels which explore the nature indeed the attitude of black community during the time when the idea of unified blackness has been discredited. Barbara Neely's female sleuth *Blanche White* is an outspoken, dark-skinned domestic worker. She is a self-governing, confident, intelligent woman who uses her knowledge to observe the domestic environment and human behavior. She uses her female intuition and her capacity that are generally unobserved or underestimated by others in solving crimes.

Barbara Neely's detective fictional series have begun with *Blanche on the Lam* and she has published four novels in the series. Her novels deal with African American domestic worker and female sleuth *Blanche White* and their themes foreground on racism. Unconventionally, in all her fictional series, she subverts the negative impacts of racism to positive strategies; her colour of a black woman and her job as a domestic worker provide her a space for cultural invisibility that aids her in solving the crimes. Barbara Neely uses the voice and experience of a black female detective *Blanche White* to create a multi-layered series. Barbara Neely's second novel *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* covers the life of the privileged people of Amber Cove, a black resort who live a pompous life as their ancestors are the first African Americans to achieve high-status in American society. She goes beyond generic boundaries of detective fiction and critiques on intra-racial conflicts and feminist concerns in this novel. *Blanche White* a female sleuth is opposite to the detective heroes like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Sam Spade. Her gears for solving crimes are personal experiences, network of friends and family. *Blanche White* is not a detective by profession but she probes into crimes not for wealth but for her concerns for black community and her friends.

Amber Cove, a black resort on the coast of Maine is known for its back history. It was built by Josiah Coghill, a black tycoon. Blanche White enters Amber Cove as a guest with her children. The moment when her foot touches Amber Cove, she senses something has gone wrong in the place. Blanche White is keen to know about the black resort where the black community leads an elite life. The nick name “Big House” (17) is appropriate to black resort implying that everything is big even the secrets of each inmate in black resort is “big”. The people in Amber Cove spend lavishly to maintain high status. Blanche observes the change in skin tone as a result of environmental and genetic factors. Apart from this, their marital relationship and partnership have made everyone to be light skinned in Amber Cove. The elite black community in Amber Cove is more racially prejudiced than the common folks. Blanche often considers Amber Cove as a place for investigation rather than relaxation. The skeletons in Amber Cove are concealed without doubts and speculations as their lives are shattered and betrayed. The people’s lips are locked everlastingly to keep their secrets as secrets forever.

The death of Hank makes Blanche White to detect the connection between the death of Faith and many facets of Mattie and Robert Stu, the brains behind every incident at Amber Cove. Hank is the Godson of Mattie, and he happened to be the first full-time black professor, who is perfect, bright, inquisitive and funny in nature. He loves his wife Carol, a dancer on west coast and they lead a happy life. However, sometimes the ego plays more than love between them. Robert Stu has attended pharmacy school and worked in Army. He often changes his attitude that suits the contexts. Stu kills his wife Susan Moon and escapes from law by stating that he has killed her in an unconscious state. Faith is not interested in societal transformation but interested in others secret and seeks pleasure in her life style. Moreover, she has stolen Robert Stu’s anklet, which is the most important clue about the murders. Blanche White observes Mattie, a feminist writer who is married to a white professor. Her education, writings and involvement in social activities and social meets have made her a “proud queen”. There is a close bonding between Blanche and Mattie and they both share their knowledge, experiences, problems apart from mutual love and care. This shows the typical female bonding in African American context. Collins commands on the African American female bonding as:

In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist....This shared recognition often operates among African American women who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood. (Collins 102-103)

Blanche White along with Mattie dismantles the main knots of the deaths that happened in Amber Cove. Mattie has lack of faith in police mainly for the reason that they will either abuse or assist but never bring justice. Besides, she is afraid of the punishment as she reminds the brain behind the plots. Mattie rips the notes of evidence of murder and replaces it with another note of same kind to conceal the life of Faith and Hank. Mattie uncovers everything for the purpose of escaping from punishment. The first clue that Blanche White as a detective finds is the belongings of Hank that includes a bundle and a note that says “Sorry to leave you, old friend, it’s just too much. I’m not sorry I killed her. She was a nasty bitch. Tell Mattie it wouldn’t have made difference. I already knew”. (107).The further clues are letters, pictures, birth certificate, gold bracelet and a clipping from a newspaper. At last Blanche White resolves that the death of Faith as natural. Blanche White refers to her “Brown skinned” companions as “talented tenth.” The term “talented tenth” promoted by W.E.B Du Bois denotes the one among ten black men who is extremely talented and his thirst for knowledge cannot be satisfied by any “industrial training” advocated by Washington. The talented tenth is a promising personality who is

capable of leading his race and uplifts his community. So, black people need new pedagogical methods like continuing and classical education to acquire full potential and to directly involve them in social change. Towards the end of the novel, Blanche White, as readers do, identifies Mattie as the “talented tenth”. Mattie’s persuasive sense is the highlight of her characteristic feature by which she persuades the mind set of any person at any situation. Finally, Barbara Neely symbolizes Mattie to be the talented tenth who possesses “queenly” qualities.

Blanche’s views Mattie as a queen of Amber Cove who could foresee everything and whose vision and tone act according to the situation. Through each and every attitude, Mattie sets high standards to claim equality with white women. Mattie, in this novel, often represents few black women who enjoy equal status and top positions in both American and African heritage. There is a strong maternal affection between Blanche and Mattie. Blanche has a greater admiration for her biological mother who has been a source of inspiration to her. Her mother protects and nurtures Blanche amidst all hardships. Blanche owes a lot to her mother as she has groomed Mattie socially acceptable. Blanche identifies the same kind of nurturing attitude, perseverance and maternal love in Mattie and she compares Mattie to her biological mother “senior diva” and fits in Mattie in her familial mother line of “wise old girls”. The novel testifies the contemporary preoccupation with a colour-coded and class conscious version of African American experience and history. The protagonist approaches the community authentically and assertively with her personal ideas and attitudes about blackness and it fits into Collin’s theory of community formation:

Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, Black women’s self definitions enabled them to refashion African – influenced conceptions of self and community. (Collins10)

Intra-racial discrimination is yet another concept that is critiqued by Barbara Neely in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. Intra-racial discrimination is the oppression, suppression, hate, dislike, or distrust of one person on another person or group of the same race based on physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, nose size, and tribal and cultural reasons as well differences in caste or class. The intra-racism revolves intensely around the issues of skin colour and hair texture. Ironically, Blanche White experiences culture shock in Amber Cove, a black resort as she witnesses bourgeois attitude of black people. She acknowledges the denial and struggles that she undergoes because of her skin colour: “nly guest present with any true colour...the things, beside colour, that made a person black were either missing or mere ghosts of their former selves...where none of the colour codes could be ignored”.(40,58,227)

Mattie the black woman hides her intra-racial relationship with a black man, and she refuses to acknowledge her son who born out of the intra-racial wedlock. Nevertheless, she proudly brings up her two sons who are born out of the interracial relationship with the white professor. Unlike other African American novels, in this novel a black woman hides her intra-racial affairs and publicizes her interracial relationship. Light skinned African Americans exercise their power over dark skinned African Americans. In this novel, Robert Stu represents the attitude of light skinned African Americans. He shows his dominance over Blanche White and he wants her to throw all evidences that she collected about Faith’s murder. This colour prejudice does not subdue Blanche. She does not want to hide her racial identity and she tries to educate her surrogate daughter Taifa to celebrate her racial identity. Taifa wants Blanche White to straighten her hair to look like a high status woman but Blanche White refuses to change her appearance. Moreover, she believes that black

women look more beautiful in dark skin and kinky hair. Taifa's words hurt Blanche "Well, you're already dark. It does not matter if you stay out in the sun" (84). In turn, Blanche White educates Taifa by stating that intelligence and character result from brain but not from skin texture of a man or a woman. Taifa imbibes a lot of stereotypical attitudes such as nobody respects and befriends a black skinned person.

Barbara Neely in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* critiques on being black and the naturalized victimization and for her intra-racism is always outside the forces of law. Blanche White sympathizes those who are suppressed within her own race. For her, it "hurt[s] more than anything any white person could ever do." (128) Ancestral worship plays another important role in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. Blanche White calls upon her ancestors for guidance whenever she is in critical position. With the assistance of female water spirit Mama Wata who is just as much a trickster figure as Blanche, Blanche's spiritual maturation takes place at the shore. Mama Wata is an African female water spirit often referred to material success. Mama Wata is known to bestow wealth and prosperity upon her followers as a reward of their admiration and devotion towards her. Mama Wata is represented in the novel through many voices and rituals. Mama Wata makes people comfortable whoever looking for happiness in their pain. Henry John Drewal's description of Mama Wata gives a crystal clear insight to Blanche's spiritual maturation with the help of water spirit:

In their worship of Mama Wata, a water spirit believed to be "foreign", African peoples from Senegal to Tanzania take exotic images and ideas, interpret them according to indigenous precepts, invest them with new meanings, and represent them in new and dynamic ways to serve their own aesthetic, devotional, and social needs. In so doing, they evaluate and transform external forces, using them to shape their own lives. (Drewal 34)

Blanche White's persona of an outspoken, politically savvy lower class black woman and her way of celebrating life through spiritual growth reflect her as member of working class. She contrasts herself from other people who give up life for petty reasons such as greed, pride, power and status. Blanche White represents the inquisitive detective nature as anachronism, implying that investigation and recovery of past political perspectives might be the solution required at present. The novel saturated with the issues of segregation within Black culture based on factors such as skin tone, class status, and family lineage. She explains the black women's ability to survive without the direct aid of a male and their ability to perform tasks that are culturally defined as "male" work. Even white and black men view black slave women as not the "real" women but are masculinized sub-human creatures. Collins states that: "One is neither born an intellectual work of the sort envisioned within Black feminism requires a process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs." (Collins 15). Barbara Neely creates Blanche White to subvert all stereotypical notions of a black woman who seeks pleasure in fooling those who ridicule her. Blanche White is concerned about herself preservation and does not want to reveal her wits. White female detectives leave other jobs and make themselves committed fully as detectives, whereas Blanche White plays dual role as a detective as well domestic worker, and she does not want to quit her job. Barbara Neely holds strong views on social issues that are informed by her extensive work experience in society. She makes *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* as a remarkable combination of genres like detection, history and politics with ethnicity. Barbara Neely in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* represents African American community as a divided community and detection in the novel is not a murder detection, but the detection of the social injustice of intra-racism. She concludes that Amber Cave pivots on the painful reality of a splintered and stressed African American community. Barbara Neely fits detective genre within feminist discourses and expands the

scope and conventions of the detective genre.

REFERENCES

1. Collins, Patricia Hill, "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment," Boston, Unwin Hymen, 1990.
2. Drewal, Henry John, "Interpretation, Invention, and Re-presentation in the Worship of Mami Wata," *Journal for Folklore* 25.101(1-2), 1988.
3. Merivale, Patricia, "An Unsuitable Genre for a Woman," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, 1996, 66-132.
4. Neely, Barbara, "Blanche Among The Talented Tenth," .New York: Penguin Books, 1994.
5. Rzepka, Charles, and Lee Horsley, Eds. "A Companion to Crime Fiction," Wiley: Blackwell, 2010.

