

# “Verses For Black Mothers”: Hughes, McKay, Brooks, Cullen, Toomer, Senghor, Césaire, Naylor and Angelou

Papa Amady Ndiaye, PhD

University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar – Senegal

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 01 Dec 2024</p> <p>Revised on: 02 Jan 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 09 Jan 2025</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords – African-American, Women, Poetry, Homage</b></p>	<p><i>Throughout African-American literature, the maternal figure has often held a central place. In many works written by African-Americans, the Negro woman, whether mother or grandmother, transcends her traditional biological role to embody survival, resistance and resilience. A central component of a community grappling with oppression and injustice, she is a source of love, strength and wisdom. A number of novels have succeeded brilliantly in highlighting these qualities and the primordial role of the Black woman, such as Sethe in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i>, who pulls out all the stops to safeguard the memory of her past and her descendants, or Lena Younger (Mama) in Lorraine Hansberry's <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>, who reveals an unwavering love and determination to maintain dignity and family unity. The aim of our article “Verses For Black Mothers” is to show that the African-American woman, through her beauty, her resilience, her sacrifice and role as guardian of the collective memory of Blacks in America, takes also a pride of place in African-American poetry, and even beyond, with French-speaking poets of the Negritude movement in particular.</i></p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

In African-American books, the maternal figure plays a central role. In many works written by African-Americans, the Negro woman, whether mother or grandmother, surpasses her traditional role as a mother figure to embody the struggle for the future, coping with oppression and injustice, and serving as a source of energy, endurance and resilience. At the heart of a community struggling with oppression and injustice, she is a source of love, strength and wisdom. In the poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, two key figures of the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s, the Black American woman, or “Negro

Mother”, is celebrated and exalted as never before. The African-American poet exalts this figure not only to pay her a well-deserved tribute for her unflinching courage and legendary tenacity, but also to highlight her social role in holding the Black community together in the face of a hostile, oppressive society. The mission of the Negro Mother has always been to foster the values of patience, perseverance and purpose in order to secure their rightful place in American society. This is what Anne-Marie Paquet demonstrates when she points out that “tributes to the African-American mother, “*The Black Mother*”, are

*flourishing. A new image was created: that of the catalyst who gives others the motivation to take action..<sup>1</sup>*

This article is structured around six sections. We will first demonstrate that an important aspect of Hughes and McKay's poetry is devoted to the rehabilitation of the Black humanity, destroyed by the ideologies of slavery and colonialism through the celebration of Black motherly figures. In the second part we shall highlight the enduring power of Black women in the Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* even though it's not a collection of poetry but rather a work of fiction, and then we will make an analysis of the Langston Hughes' piece "Song For A Dark Girl" in an attempt to shed light on the impact of the racial violence targeting Black males, on African-American women. The fourth section of the article is celebration of the strength by which Black Women survived the wrongs against the African-American community in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker and Maya Angelou. In the final section, we deemed it interesting to revisit Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a groundbreaking masterpiece that addresses themes of racial identity, the legacy of slavery while putting a stress of his portrayal of two African-American female figures: Karintha and Fern whom the poet provides with sensual dimensions and mesmerizing effects on others.

## II. TRIBUTE TO BLACK FIGURES: A KEY ASPECT OF HUGHES AND MCKAY'S CULT OF BLACKNESS

This is precisely why, beyond skin color, a major aspect of Hughes and McKay's cult of Blackness remains the spirit of perseverance and the role of black mothers in the war against racial injustice. In this regard, Emanuel observes that: « *One of the most important character features implied by negritude [in Hughes] is endurance [of the Negro Mothers].* »<sup>2</sup> This is a topic on which the African-American poet puts a great deal of emphasis, giving voice to black women whose strong personalities and willingness to infuse these racial values are highlighted. In the poems 'Mother to

Son' and 'The Negro Mother', the voices of black mothers are particularly amplified. In the first monologue, Hughes gives voice to a black mother who is not spared the effects of racial oppression, and who seeks to transmit to her son her own determination to survive in spite of the fact that the path is scattered with rocks and pitfalls. The poem reads:

*Well, son, I'll tell you:*

*Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*

*It's had tacks in it*

*And splinters*

*And boards torn up,*

*And places with no carpet on the floor-*

*Bare*

*But all the time*

*I've been a-climbin' on,*

*And reachin' landin's*

*And turnin' corners*

*And sometimes goin' in the dark*

*Where there ain't been no light*

*So boy, don't you turn back.*

*Don't you set down on the steps*

*Cause you find it's kinder hard*

*Don't you fall now-*

*For I've still going, honey*

*I've still climbin*

*And life for me ain't been no crystal stairs (30)<sup>3</sup>*

For the Black mother, no matter how daunting these adversities may seem, they should not hold back the social ascent and racial integration of the new, emerging black generation. To give in and surrender would, for the Black Mother, is tantamount to defeat in the racial struggle. Hughes' predecessor and a leading figure in Black nationalism, James Weldon Johnson, warned "*Young man-Young man- / Smooth and easy is the road / That leads to hell and destruction*"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anne-Marie Paquet, *Toni Morrison : Figures de Femmes*, Presses de l'université de Paris-Sorbonne (1996) p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> James A. Emanuel. *Langston Hughes. (Translated from American by Jacque Eymesse) Paris: Les Editions Internationales, 1970.* p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad, Associate ed. David Roessel, New York, Vintage Books, 1994 (References to Hughes' poems are to this edition and are indicated in brackets throughout the text.)

<sup>4</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Complete Poems. London: Pinguin Classics, 2000* p. 19.

Addressing her son, the "Black Mother" utilizes powerful imagery, that of a difficult staircase to climb that isn't made of crystal, with plenty of "tacks and breaks" on it. It is to such a staircase that the African-American lady compares the road she had to travel, to get to where she is today. Despite the hardships she's endured, she hasn't thought for a moment of letting herself beaten down by the hardships and "banana peels" placed by mainstream society to halt her progress.

By deciding to share her ordeal with her son, who is obviously in the grip of the injustice of white society, the African-American mother figure seeks to comfort her son, inviting him to draw inspiration from her story. The poem's repetition of the line "I've been climbin'on" is no accident. In so doing, Hughes urges his race brothers to repeat their efforts to achieve socio-economic integration. The term "honey" used by the Black Mother in the 18th line of "Mother to Son" reflects the love that mother figures have for their black offspring, whom they have often been the only ones to raise, their fathers in many cases being emasculated and unable to provide for their families' basic needs due to oppression and unemployment.

This relentless drive to survive characterizes the other black mother depicted in 'The Negro Mother'. It's a lyrical poem written as a narrative in which the 'Black Mother' conveys to her children the uphill battles she has had to fight in order to endure and thrive. From the very first lines of the poem, the "Black Mother" reminds her offspring of the mistreatment she faced in and how, against all odds, she stood her ground to survive. It's worth noting that the Black Mother's ordeal reflects the collective oppressive experience of the entire Black American community since their arrival in the Americas:

*Children, I come back today  
To tell you a story of the long dark way  
That I had to climb, that I had to know  
In order that the race might live and grow (155)*

The poem unfolds with the words "Children, I come back today", as if to point out that the Black Mother is nonetheless aware of her mission to shape future generations. The verb "come back" suggests that she is accustomed to addressing her children repeatedly, so that they never lose sight of her past struggles for the survival and well-being of the African-Americans:

*Look at my face -- dark as the night –  
Yet shining like the sun with love's true light.  
I am the dark girl who crossed the red sea  
Carrying in my body the seed of the free.  
I am the woman who worked in the field  
Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield.  
I am the one who labored as a slave,  
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave –  
Children sold away from me, I'm husband sold, too.  
No safety, no love, no respect was I due. (155)*

In the line "look at my face -dark as the night", a recurrent notion in Hughes' work, namely self-assertion, i.e. racial pride, comes to the fore.

Later in her recital, the Black Mother touches on a grim episode in the history of African-Americans, the slave trade, which, despite its brutality, never succeeded in taking away the inborn resolve and innermost hope of the Black slaves to someday attain freedom. "[I] carried in my body the seed of the free", which reflects an unshakeable stoicism on her part.

One of the most harrowing aspects of the Black slave's situation in America is also recalled by the Black Mother. That is, the transplantation of slaves, involving the forced splitting up of members of the same family. However inhumane this experience may be, it did not cause the brave Black mother to crumble or surrender. She is convinced that by holding firm she would, through her resolve, be able to pave the way for the survival of subsequent generations:

*Three hundred years in the deepest South:  
But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth.  
God put a dream like steel in my soul.  
Now, through my children, I'm reaching the goal. (155)*

According to Jemie "At a time and place where black life is held cheap and the days of black men appear to be numbered, the poem [The Negro Mother] is a majestic reminder of the strength and fullness of history, of the

*source of that life which transcends even ceaseless labor and burning crosses.”<sup>5</sup>*

The powerful presence of the Black Mother occupies a pivotal role in McKay's poetic work. For him, this figure is embodied by his own mother, Hannah Ann Elizabeth McKay, a woman of strong character and a kind of moral motherly figure within the Black peasant community of Sunny Ville. More than the father of the McKay family, "Mama Anna" played a significant role in shaping Claude's character and personality. She never missed an opportunity to instill in her children a deep sense of racial and ancestral pride. Concerned with raising her children to be proud individuals "in no way inclined to apologize for the color of their skin," as Wagner puts it, Anna wouldn't miss any opportunity to tell young Claude and his siblings about the heroic deeds of their ancestors while they were under the yoke of slavery.

Besides, the Jamaican poet's mother had an unusual kindness and an extraordinary attentiveness towards the predominantly black members of her community. She would gladly open her door to the wife beaten up by her husband, lend her shoulder for the teenager abused by her boyfriend to cry on, mediate between iron out the differences between family members in conflict and willingly share her food with needy neighbors. Speaking of his mother, McKay recalls that his mother cared little for people's moral character. What mattered to her was helping people out of the goodness of her heart. In the opinion of the poet, it's clear that he's none in the community could hold a candle to Hannah Elizabeth who devoted her entire life and energy to preventing the implosion of Sunny Ville's black community. For McKay, there are no words powerful enough to describe her mother's loyal attitude to the oppressed race to which she belongs. "Ribber Come Do'n" is a dialect poem that appeared in one of McKay's first collections. It's a heartfelt tribute of her brave mother who wouldn't hesitate for a second to deprive herself and her own children of food to appease the hunger of a neighbor's children. McKay proudly recounts an episode when "Mother Mac" had to offer some of her food supplies to Milly, a fourteen-year-old whose little sisters and brothers

were starving as their parents were held up at their workplaces by a river flood:

*I know the magic word, the graceful thought,  
The song that fills me in my lucid hours,  
The spirit's wine that thrills my body through,  
And makes me music-drunk, are yours, all yours.  
I cannot praise for you have passed from praise,  
I have no tinted thoughts to paint you true;  
But I can feel and I can write the word;  
The best of me is but the least of you. <sup>6</sup>*

Later on, Léopold Sédar Senghor's poem "Femme Noire" is one of his best-known and most acclaimed pieces echoes both McKay and Hughes in its attempt to pay a powerful tribute to the dignity, beauty and vitality of the African woman.

Published in 1945 and included in the collection *Chants d'Ombre Femme Noire* is part of the Négritude movement, which Senghor co-founded with Aimé Césaire and Léon Gontran Damas. *Négritude* or Blackness seeks to restore and celebrate the identity, culture and dignity of the African people against colonization. In this poem, the figure of the African woman is not only a symbol of beauty, strength and motherliness, but also represents Africa itself. To Senghor Africa represents both his homeland and the land that nurtures and protects him.

Composed in free verse, the piece features no regular rhyme scheme or fixed structure. The idea behind this is to let Senghor's poetry flow naturally, like a song in praise of the black woman. The poem unfolds through a series of metaphors and images that extol this feminine figure.

In the opening lines of "Femme Noire", Senghor lauds the beauty of the black woman. He describes her in exalted terms, using sensual, natural metaphors, such as "black skin" and "the color of oil". This skin color is magnificently ennobled as a symbol of purity and grace. The image of the woman is often associated with nature: her beauty is that of the African earth itself. The black continent's earth is reputed to abound with richness and fertility.

<sup>5</sup> Jemie, Onwuchekwa. Langston Hughes; An Introduction to the Poetry. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976,

<sup>6</sup> Claude McKay, Complete Poems ed, William J. Maxwell, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2004, (References to McKay's poems

are to this edition and are indicated in brackets throughout the text.)



Through the verse “*I discover you, Promised Land, from the top of a burnt-out pass*”, Senghor compares the African woman to nature. She is at once the African earth and the nurturing mother. Her curves are compared to hills, her skin to ebony, reinforcing the idea that black women and Africa are inextricably linked. The use of natural elements (oil, ebony, tam-tam) further underscores this idea of connectedness between woman and earth.

The Black women are also acclaimed as mothers. “*Naked woman, Black woman, dressed in your color which is life, in your form which is beauty!*” highlights the idea that woman, in her simplicity and essential nature, is a life-giving source. Here, the African woman epitomizes peaceful strength. She is all the more capable of transmitting life and protecting those that are dear to her.

The black woman embodies Africa itself. Using sensual, visual descriptions, Senghor celebrates not only natural grace, but also the depth of African history and civilization.

According to the poet, every woman is a metaphor for the greatness of Africa, a continent that, despite being shattered by the effects of colonialism, continues to hold on to its intrinsic dignity and attractiveness.

Although the tone of the piece reflects an eminently sensual nature, the poet retains himself from the point of view of vulgarity. The eroticism is sublimated by the spiritual and sacred.

In his endeavor to bring together the body and soul at last, Senghor successfully manages to unite the physical and the spiritual. For him, what is a woman's outward beauty is but the mirror image of her inner beauty, her soul. He exalts both her body and her spirit, as in this phrase: “*Naked woman, black woman, I sing of your passing beauty, a form I gaze upon in the Eternal.*” Here, he shows that the beauty of the black woman transcends time and endures forever.

Langston Hughes uses his legendary simplicity as he marvels at the beauty of her Black lover. He confesses in “*Fascination*” “*Her teeth are as white as meat of an apple/Her lips are like dark ripe plums/I love her/And because her skin is the brown of an oak leaf in autumn.../I want to kiss her* (39). He eloquently portrays the black

woman whose face and skin are so attractive and fascinating at the same time.

One passage *Notebook of a Return To The Native Land* by Césaire, chants African elegance and beauty when he writes: “*The woman standing alone/and standing up my dead who have me by the throat with hands so beautiful/and I'm standing up, standing up, and free...>*”<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, this passage shows how Césaire sees beauty not only in the body, but also in the resistance and heritage of African ancestors. The standing woman here is a representation of collective strength and dignity. He links this beauty to the struggle for freedom, rooted in a culture that continues to resist and exist, despite attempts by colonialism to destroy it. Césaire one's asserted at the French parliament that for him to get a good education, his grandmother, the brave Black woman who raised him, had to bleed herself dry and sacrifice everything.

While the poem does not devote a passage directly to African physical beauty like his contemporary Leopold Senghor, it does extol it by highlighting the resilience, identity and pride of the black people, which he associates with an inner, cultural aspect of beauty.

One key aspect of the cult of *Blackness* for Langston Hughes and Claude McKay involves the celebration of the physical appearance of the black woman. In their works, both poets are quick to emphasize the sensual beauty of the black woman. For the African-American poet and the Jamaican poet, it's an attempt to question, even reject, the “Caucasian” aesthetic ideal as a standard of beauty, with a view to reasserting Negro values and identity in the Americas.

By championing the beauty of the Black woman, the African-American poet goes so far as to “sing the beauty of a black woman who is not beautiful, and praise her purity when she is not virtuous”, in the words of Jean Wagner. In the first two stanzas of 'Poem [4]: To The Black Beloved', he claims:

*My black one,  
Thou art not beautiful  
Yet thou hast  
A loveliness*

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<sup>7</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, présence africaine, 1947

*Surpassing beauty.*

*My black one,*

*Thou art not good*

*Yet thou hast*

*A purity*

*Surpassing goodness.*

Further on, Hughes, extolling the sensual beauty of black women, speaks in the same vein, dazzled by the authentic beauty of a young black girl forced by extreme poverty to descend on the sidewalks of Harlem to whore out her favors. In contemplating the beauty of this harlot, the African-American poet highlights the beauty and authenticity of her black skin. Needless to say, from the point of view of the black poet, it is precisely the color of her skin that makes the young Harlem prostitute so gorgeous:

*Her dark brown face*

*Is like a withered flower*

*On a broken stem.*

*Those kind come cheap in Harlem*

*So they say. (33)*

McKay has a similar point in his "Harlem Shadows" sonnet.

With a view to restoring the physical beauty of women of his race denied it by mainstream society, the Jamaican poet, while exposing the white oppression that forces his racial sisters to become whores as the only way out their precarious existence, can't help but chants the exquisite beauty that nature has bestowed on black-skinned women.

The opening stanzas of this sonnet, which is both an expression of McKay's racial activism and racial apology, read as follows:

*I hear the halting footsteps of a lass*

*In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall*

*Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass*

*To bend and barter at desire's call.*

*Ah, little dark girls who in slipped feet*

*Go prowling through the night from street to street!*

...

*Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way*

*Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,*

*Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,*

*The sacred brown feet of my fallen race! (161-62)*

"Verses for Black Mothers" also, is a powerful tribute to the ability, wisdom and enduring legacy of black mothers. Written by Evans G. Valens, it pays tribute to their role as vectors of history, purveyors of unwavering love and resilience in the face of adversity. The poem highlights the deep, centuries-old bond between black mothers and their ancestors and offspring. It shows how they go on nurturing and safeguarding their families despite the difficulties they face in a racist society. In their desire to see a black elite emerge, the Afro-American mother mothers not only her own children, but also the young members of the entire black community.

From the very first lines, "*Heritage strong, hands warm and wise*", it is suggested that black mothers are not only the physical custodians of their families, but also the guardians of a powerful cultural and historical heritage. They are the repositories of an entire community's consciousness. Their wisdom, handed down from generation to generation, is intimately linked to the legacy of their predecessors.

The line "*Legacy thrives where love never dies*" conveys the concept that the love of Black mothers is eternal, ensuring the continuity of their cultural and personal heritage.

Through the expressions "*Gentle lessons, softly taught*", the poet emphasizes the nurturing and educational nature of Black mothers' mission. Their lessons, though sometimes subtle, are transformative and shape the future of their children and their communities.

"*History woven, battles fought*", it suggests that Black mothers are bearers of the history of the struggle. The fearless and resilient mothers waged their struggles through their own personal experiences and through the collective experiences of their ancestors, especially the slaves. According to Jean Wagner "*If the Black man has been able to resist triumphantly for more than three centuries in a hostile environment, it is because he has had*

*the strength to start again and again, even when everything seemed lost.”<sup>8</sup>*

They also instill the values of resilience and perseverance in the face of oppression and injustice.

The phrase “*of courage crafted in molds of old*” refers to the strength that transcends time and space of black mothers, which has been shaped by generations who fought uphill battle in order to endure and survive in hostile environment.

“*The strength that lies in love and not in pride*” highlights a far-reaching form of power rooted in love rather than arrogance, implying that the strength of Black mothers is selfless and dedicated to the well-being of others.

“*Through hardship they rise, not fall*” is a powerful affirmation of resilience. Black mothers have weathered many hardships, but they continue to rise, remain strong despite the circumstances, and provide support to those around them.

The phrase “*Their embrace a fortress wall*” depicts the love and protection of black mothers as a fortress against the harshness of the world, offering comfort and security to their families.

The tone of the poem culminates in a recognition of the eternal love of Black mothers: “*Mothers, daughters, clear lineage, the love of black mothers, forever dear*”. This last line links past, present and future, showing the unbroken line of strength and affection that runs through black families.

According to the poet Jemie “*Their [The Black Mothers'] reward is in their vision of the possibility of freedom for their children. For, they're conservers and transmitters of the national soul, an example of love, wisdom, perseverance and triumph for the younger generations to emulate*”<sup>9</sup>

Countee Cullen, one of the most influential poets of the Harlem Renaissance, has often touched on topics related to the African-American experience and racial stress. Although he didn't explicitly write a specific poem that directly celebrates the Black woman as boldly as his contemporary Hughes or the Senegalese poet Leopold Sedar Senghor, Cullen nonetheless underscores themes of African identity, beauty and black culture. He expresses his pride in his African

heritage despite the distance that separate him from the land of his forefathers.

It's a rarity in Cullen's poetry to come across an explicit celebration the grace of black women. Yet in his famous poem “Heritage” (1925), written at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, there is a passage that can be interpreted as a celebration of African heritage as a whole, in which black women play an essential part in maintaining culture and tradition.

*What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?<sup>10</sup>*

In this excerpt, Cullen speaks of Africa as a land both mythical and remote, extolling the awesome beauty and dignity of Black men and women. The expression “regal black women” can be understood and interpreted as a nod to these female figures. For Cullen these brave women better incarnate the African heritage and pride.

The poem not being exclusively dedicated to Black women, doesn't mean that it doesn't give a place of pride on aspects of black identity and culture, including the celebration of African women because of their majesty and dignity.

### III. RESILIENCE AND HOPE AMIDST ADVERSITY IN NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

In her novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor pays resounding tribute to the strength, resilience and solidarity of black women against the backdrop of social exclusion within their own homeland. She resorts to their personal experiences of oppression only to underscore the fact that these women stand as bedrocks in their communities.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Wagner, *Les Poètes Noirs des Etats-Unis*. Paris : Librairie Istra, 1962 p. 203

<sup>9</sup> Jemie Onwuchekwa, op. cit. p.101

<sup>10</sup> Countee Cullen, *Heritage* in All Poetry website, <https://allpoetry.com/poem/8497383-Heritage-by-Countee-Cullen>

The story takes place in a poor, secluded and marginalized neighborhood called Brewster Place, where the lives of seven African-American women are closely interwoven. Brewster Place serves as both a setting and a metaphor for the challenges the women must confront for their survival, but also for their resilience.

It's worth noting that although the book is not a poem, it is full of poetic flourishes that glorify the strength of black women. With each character, Naylor highlights various aspects of these women's lives - their pain, their hope, their struggle against neediness, racism and sexism. Despite these hardships, they show outstanding strength and resilience. While some of them indulge in back-breaking chores, others have worked their fingers to the bones without being able to make ends meet. They can't glimpse at any possibility of social ascension.

The resilience and stoicism they show in the face of adversity is quite praiseworthy as the brave Women of Brewster Place must struggle from dusk to dawn against social and economic hurdles. Yet they always manage to find a way out, through solidarity and mutual support. They shall press ahead against all odds. Their ability to endure hardship and find the strength to move on is a form of powerful endurance that Naylor praises.

Female solidarity is one of the focal themes of the novel. The sisterhood and solidarity that exist between these women is unusual. Regardless of their dissimilarity, they join forces in their uphill struggle to survive and protect each other. In so doing, they epitomize the collective strength of black women in their community.

In furtherance, the novel writer pays a tribute to their full humanity and their heroes as their vulnerability here cannot be not interpreted as weakness.

Despite the harsh, oppressive environment of Brewster Place, some women continue to keep a stiff upper lip and find a way to overcome their situation. This, for Naylor is a symbol of their inner power to transform. The wall that encloses Brewster Place is a metaphor of both a barrier and a space that these women seek to surpass.

#### IV. RACIAL VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON BLACK WOMEN IN HUGHES' "SONG FOR A DARK GIRL"

The poem that, in our opinion, most eloquently captures racial violence and its effects on Black women remains Langston Hughes' "Song for a Dark Girl". This is a composition in three stanzas written as early as 1927. This shows the poet's early awareness of the plight of his race in the US society. It is as poignant as it is tragic.

Hughes reflects the pain of African-Americans in the face of racial violence, particularly the lynching spree, a practice that was commonplace in the United States in the early 20th century. Hughes, uses simple but powerful language to illustrate this tragedy and express his outcry.

"Song for a Dark Girl", is the inner-thoughts of a young Black woman overwhelmed by an unspeakable pain after the burning, mutilation and hanging of her lover, an act of racial violence that was widespread in the southern States and which targeted exclusively Black men. Hughes chooses to use a simple structure, almost like a folk song, but it is precisely this simplicity that we see in many of the African-American poet's work that makes the reality he describes all the harsher.

Early in the piece, he hints at a specific place, the South, where acts of brutality were tragically rife:

*Way Down South in Dixie (Break the heart of me) (104)*

Dixie is another name for the Southern States, a region marked by a history of slavery, segregation, White supremacy and racial violence against the Black population. In just a few words, Hughes captures both the location and the emotional repercussion "*the heartbreak of the young woman.*" Here the poet's intent is to highlight the devastating impact of the summary execution of the young black male on their helpless lovers, sisters and mothers.

The systemic racism in the South has taken a particular toll on the young Black girl. The young girl's lover has been hung from a tree. Shocking as it is, this image was not a rarity in the Dixie. The lover's death is not natural, nor is it justified; it is nothing less than the outcome of violent racism on Black men. The loss of a loved one symbolizes the destruction of love itself as well as the beheading of the Black family to racial hatred.



In reiterating the image of the South and the lynching spree, Hughes lays emphasis on the contrast between the romantic idea of love and the harshness of racial violence.

In the face of the atrocity, the loss of faith of the Black women, whose religiosity has been celebrated in countless the Afro-American works, is introduced by Hughes when he writes:

*I asked the white Lord Jesus*

*What was the use of prayer. (104)*

The bereaved lover questions of the relevance of prayer and religion, Christianity in this case in a world where innocent persons are killed and hung to a tree by a crossroad just because of the color of their skins.

The young woman who needs answers, turns to Jesus, but she comes to the conclusion that prayers are pointless, should such evils continue to prevail. The expression of "white Lord Jesus" suggests a sense of alienation from a prophetic figure who, historically, has often been portrayed as white. She is definitely in conflict with the Christian religion whose prophet seems heedless to the suffering of the Black community.

The poem can be read as a heartfelt tribute to black women who despite the senseless of the atrocity against their sons, brothers and lovers, have remained dignified and enduring.

## V. THE RESILIENCE AND ENDURING POWER OF BLACK WOMEN IN ANGELOU, WALKER AND BROOKS

Maya Angelou was at the forefront of in the efforts of Black authors of her time, to celebrate the identity of Black women, particularly their selflessness, courage, and resilience in a context of racial oppression. She has always strived to help Black women get rid of false stereotypes and inferiority complexes. Angelou rather encourage her sisters to take pride their identity and accept and celebrate themselves like Walt Whitman has done his famous poem "Song Of Myself". "*I sing myself, I celebrate myself, and what I assume, you shall assume for every atom belonging to, belongs to you as well*" Whitman proudly asserts.

This is the true meaning behind her highly acclaimed poem "Phenomenal Woman" in which she questions and challenges the conception of feminine beauty. Angelou is up in arms against the narrow societal beauty standards. She rather makes clear that true beauty can only come from self-confidence and self-acceptance. The poet opens the piece by referring to the "secret" of her allure. "*I'm not cute, and I'm not a fashion model's height. / But when I start telling them, / they think I'm telling lies*"<sup>11</sup> she writes.

At the outset of the poem, which is about self-assurance and strong personal presence. the author confesses that she may not fit the conventional image of attractiveness: she doesn't have a model's body. Still, she is quite eye-catching. When approached about her appeal, she reveals that it's not a matter of superficial appearance, but of inner confidence and self-assurance. That's what draws people to her just like Toomer's figures Fern and Karantha.

*Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.<sup>12</sup>*

The phrase "*inner mystery*" alludes to her self-love and appreciation of her own worth, something that those around her can feel but can hardly grasp.

Indeed, the Phenomenal Woman's impact on others is truly powerful. The author highlights people's reactions to her as both men and women are mesmerized when she walks in. They're all the more so captivated since they are unable to put their finger on exactly what it is that makes her so special. Her allure is intangible, and goes beyond her appearance.

Margaret Walker for her part, was quite sensitive to the plight of his Black people that have suffered for centuries, from the time they set foot on the American soil to the present time as well. Her poem "For My People" is a tribute to their resilience and enduring power over the years despite all the suffering inflicted upon them. The second stanza of the poem reads as follows:

*For my people lending their strength to the years, to the  
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,*

<sup>11</sup> Maya Angelou, Phenomenal Woman Random House; 1st edition (January 17, 1995)

<sup>12</sup> Jean Toomer, Cane: A Norton Critical Edition (Norton Critical Editions)

*washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending  
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching  
dragging along never gaining never reaping never  
knowing and never understanding;*<sup>13</sup>

In these lines Walker comes back on the exploitation of African Americans, particularly those in the working class, who have over the years worked their back off relentlessly without ever being able to break the cycle of poverty. Hard as they may work, they struggle to make ends meet.

In the phrase "*Lending their strength*», the poet underlines the enduring struggle of African Americans across time with no due reward. Her brave People's plight is somewhat reminiscent of *Sisyphus myth* and his endless vain efforts. Blacks have selflessly contributed to the erection of the prosperous society without seeing the fruits of their labor.

The catalogue of the chores African-Americans fulfill, is an allusion to Black women's manual and hard chores over the centuries which is one of the central themes reflected in most tributes them. The Black women, during slavery times, have often been used by their White masters as pack animals, toiling from dawn to dusk. No only they do they "wash, iron, cook," clean, serve food, they would also attend to the needs of the White babies.

"Negro" by Hughes echoes Walker's piece as it also lists the many injustices Blacks have suffered over the centuries:

*I am a Negro:*

*Black as the night is black,*

*Black like the depths of my Africa.*

*I've been a slave:*

*Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.*

*I brushed the boots of Washington.*

*I've been a worker:*

*Under my hand the pyramids arose.*

*I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.*

"Negro" is a concise but powerful work that intends to capture Black experience, identity and the quest to belong.

In an America where racial shame and pessimism prevailed among the majority of Blacks, the Black poet proclaims loud and clear "*I am a Negro*". However, beyond the poem's apology for Black skin, Hughes exalts black people's strength of character through their determination to overcome the prejudices they have suffered throughout history. In Jemie's opinion, "*Negro*' is both a catalog of wrongs against the black man over the centuries and the celebration of the strength by which he has survived those wrongs."<sup>14</sup>

While Hughes' work frequently deals with social justice issues, and while "Negro" may sound more soul-searching, it successfully manages to address in a somewhat subtle fashion the societal context that shapes Blacks' experiences as an oppressed people. Most of its lines can thus be read as a call for social change and the recognition of marginalized identities.

The chores Walkers describes are mostly background activities that reflect the extent to which African-Americans, particularly in the service sector, have been cast to the margins of society. The list of verbs is a reflection of the crushing, endless nature of their tasks. It's both a literal and symbolic representation of the hard work the African-Americans had to endure to keep body and soul together for themselves and their offspring. Unfortunately, this sacrifice done mostly by the women, is poorly rewarded, often goes unnoticed and underappreciated.

"*Dragging along*" connotes the exhaustion and weariness stemming from years of strenuous work. By using "*never*" repeatedly, the poet lays emphasis on the lack of rewards, be they material wealth ("*never to win*"), spiritual fulfillment or insight into the reasons for their suffering without ever being able to climb the social ladder in America.

Walker's piece can be interpreted to large extent as an homage to the resilience and bravery of the African-Americans in general but as praise to the Black women who despite the hardships, oppression and exploitation press ahead in order to survive.

As far as she is concerned, Gwendolyn Brooks, one the female figures of the Renaissance Harlem, thinks that the Black women are so resilient and enduring and have made so many sacrifices for the survival of their

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Walker, For My People (Yale Series of Younger Poets) October 2019

<sup>14</sup> Jemie, op.cit

communities that they deserve recognition from the rest of world.

In Brooks' poems, the stress is put in the enormous sacrifices for the survival and upliftment of their communities by Black people. Through their relentless work, selfless unwavering love, and perseverance, they have managed to keep families and entire communities in cohesion, all of which being necessary to face up with systemic oppression and racism.

"To Black Women" is the poem by Brooks that better illustrates the unique resilient strength and dignity of Black women as they try to come to terms with historical and social adversity. The committed poet that she is, hails not only her sisters' physical appearance, but above all their character and their quest for dignity and recognition.

She asserts Black Woman's gracious beauty and dignity in the following terms:

*It has been a  
hard trudge, with fainting, bandaging and death.  
There have been startling confrontations.  
There have been trappings. Trappings  
of monarchs and of other men.  
But there remain large countries in your eyes.  
Shrewd sun.  
The civil balance.  
The listening secrets.  
And you create and train your flowers still.*<sup>15</sup>

The piece as a whole is written as a reaction to the centuries-old denial of Black beauty in societies dictated by Eurocentric norms. The African-American poet is drawing attention to the beauty of her sisters. To her the Black women's beauty is both sensual and in terms of characters thanks to their resilience and humanity.

In her portrayal, Brooks does not dwell much on their victimization throughout history, she rather insists on their capacity pick themselves up after every trial and tribulation. They always find within their inmost selves the strength to rise again, even after being brought low by injustice. This is a central motif of the poem.

In her tribute, Brooks gives over the floor to the everyday African-Americans women who cannot merely be seen to be resilient in the face of oppression, but also to be resilient in the face of violence. As we've seen it, in Naylor's *Women in Brewster Place*, there is among them a sense of community and mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging on which they need to build to overcome the pressure exerted on them by a predominantly White and racist society.

## VI. CANE AS A CELEBRATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY THROUGH BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS

In 1923, a ground-breaking literary work entitled *Cane* which the Black sociologist Charles S. Johnson labelled as "the most astonishingly brilliant beginning of any Negro writer of his generation" was published by Jean Toomer. He is deemed to be an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance despite his attempts to dissociate himself from the movement calling himself rather an American writer. *Cane*, a hybrid work of poetry, prose and drama, in many ways, celebrates Black women in its exploration of the lives of African Americans in both rural and urban settings. Toomer has an original technique in this work in portraying Black women in a complex and multi-faceted way, showing their strength, beauty, and resilience, as well as the challenges they are grappling with due to race, gender, and societal expectations.

Toomer gives Black women a full panoply of human emotions, longings and authentic experiences. In that he is on the same wavelength with Hughes in his attempt not to merely represent them as stereotypes or simplistic portrayals, but to give them the full range of human feelings and yearnings. Characters like Karintha and Fern in *Cane* are a case in point as they are depicted with layers of complexity, showing their sensuality. Black women's grace and sensuality was one of Langston Hughes' favorite topics. Toomer sings in an epic manner the inner conflicts and emotional burdens they shoulder with pride and dignity. This complexity reflects Toomer's appreciation of their individuality and inner life.

Black women depicted in Toomer's masterpiece often typify the American South, Black ancestry and a deep

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<sup>15</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006

connection to the land. For Toomer, they are central to the cultural and spiritual life of the African-American world. Black women represent fecundity as well as creativity and the poet's lyrical depictions of their grace and beauty is quite outstanding.

Women in Toomer's work are often struggling harsh realities, whether it's the burden of racial discrimination, gender oppression, or economic hardship. Yet, despite these challenges, Toomer celebrates their perseverance, wisdom, and positive influence on the community.

Toomer in many instances, associates Black women with mystical and spiritual qualities. He creates some sort of connection between them and the earth and to a greater sense of belonging. By way of illustration, the character of Fern, is depicted as having a mysterious, almost hypnotic presence that has a deep impact on the men she meets. This suggests a form of inner power and allure that goes beyond physical beauty. Here the beauty ceases to be physical in order to become spiritual.

Whereas Fern who is solitary figure, epitomizes both the mystique and complexity of Black womanhood according to Jean Toomer, Karintha is described as being full of grace and attractive to men from a young age. Yet, her life is a succession of pain and hardship. Toomer reflects on how societal pressures and expectations affect her, but her beauty and allure remain powerful.

If Jean Toomer's name and *Cane*, a stroke of genius from its author, cannot be dissociated from the Harlem literary movement, it's especially because the author provides a nuanced and delightful portrayal of Black women, celebrating their grace, inmost resilience, and complexity, while also recognizing the societal challenges they are grappling with.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The resilience, strength and beauty of the African-American woman is a central theme of American literature, particularly in the writings of African-American authors. If the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, like Hughes, McKay and Toomer, depicted strong-willed women who had always shown an unshakeable drive to survive and advance in a hostile environment, authors like Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and poets like Gwendolyn Brooks

succeeded brilliantly in extolling their stories, portraying them as symbols of struggle, hope and humanity. Their grace and poise have not been outdone either in Angelou's poetry and that of the Negritude poets such as Senghor and Césaire.

The relevance of the highlighting the centrality of Black women's in African-American literature is of paramount importance as it rehabilitates them by addressing historical silences, celebrating the gracious beauty by challenging stereotypes. It is also paramount to showcase their contribution in the long march of the Black community towards freedom and equality by laying emphasis on their unflinching resilience and resistance in hostile environment, which Hughes captures so well in an epic poem he entitled "The Negro Mother" and which could be a subject of an article itself.

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