



# The Casting of Males and Females in Black Short Fiction

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## Introduction

Hypothetically the depiction of male and female characters in short black fiction makes an interesting study. But this is a tall order in view of the socio-cultural and historical backgrounds of the “abantu” (people) represented in black fiction, and these backgrounds somewhat determine the voices characters have. Houston Baker (1971) states that understanding African American literature entails recognition of African Americans as being social products “shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament.” And in understanding literature by African writers, socio-cultural and historical factors are equally important, and, in many cases, the effects of colonialism cannot be avoided. Commenting in the early 1990’s, Innes, a co-editor of Chinua Achebe’s, refers to South African writers developing the “realist mode of their predecessors, portraying in harsh detail the lives of the black proletariat in the shanty towns and urban ghettos” [1]. A diversity of themes, forms and styles can be found in short black fiction written over the years, and a range of complex motivations and behaviors are exhibited by characters. However, the aim of this paper is to sample a few descriptors that characterize black males and females (African and African American) as portrayed in this genre.

## Characterization

Motherliness, responsibility, and independence are distinctions of black American women; African women (those on the African continent) generally embody the usual qualities of African womanhood: obedience, patience, devotion, faithfulness, and productivity. But African women can also have minds of their own, a trait which can put them at variance with societal standards. The

African woman’s role and actions are defined in terms of the society to which she belongs because she has traditionally been considered the property of her society. If she asserts herself or opts for a lifestyle not sanctioned by the society, she becomes a pariah and, ironically, may be considered a social outcast but, unfortunately, one exploited by the very people who disapprove of her deviant way of life. A woman in this situation finds herself trapped, as in the case of Beatrice in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s “Minutes of Glory” [2]. Beatrice has chosen the life of a prostitute. Because she has, as it were, jumped the fence, she has become a thing to be exploited since she is no longer in the traditional enclosure which symbolizes protection from herself and from the vultures.

African women are also very subtle. An example of this is Ayo in “The Truly Married Woman” by Abioseh Nicol [3]. Ayo has been living with Ajayi, a clerk, in the city for 12 years and has borne him three children (and the fourth one is on the way). However, for no apparent reason, Ajayi has never gotten around to marrying her “legally.” Originally, Ajayi wanted to be sure of Ayo’s fertility before he married her, but even after proof, he never got around to marrying her. To impress American missionaries who happen to pass through the country, Ajayi decides to marry Ayo legally. The couple carry out the traditional pre-wedding and wedding rituals according to the customs, making sure everything is done correctly. After the marriage, Ajayi assumes his life will be exactly as it was before the wedding. Ayo, who is now a married woman, feels she does not have to act subservient to Ajayi anymore. The morning after the wedding Ayo informs Ajayi that he will now get his own tea and breakfast:

Ajayi, my husband...for fourteen years I have got up every morning at five to make tea for you and breakfast. Now I am a truly married woman; you must treat me with a little respect. You are now my husband and not a lover. Get up and make yourself a cup of tea [3].

According to Makward [4], the author Mariama Ba had a vision of an African society where men and women would share equally in the duties as well as the joys and the rewards of a harmonious relationship between one husband and one wife.

In "An Incident in Ghobashi's Household," Alifa Rifaat [2], portrays an example of ingeniousness on the part of an African woman. When the girl's father is away, her mother, Zeinat, discovers that their daughter is pregnant. Zeinat instinctively decides to send Ni'ma to Cairo, Egypt, for the duration of the pregnancy and birth of the child. She cleverly fakes a pregnancy putting a bundle of clothes under her dresses in the stomach area. In this way Ghobashi will think he has a new son instead of an illegitimate grandson.

African American women are generally portrayed by both male and female writers as strong and powerful characters. Their independence is, however, not only positive but also negative; therefore, strong women find themselves in conflict with others, particularly their mothers. In Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," mother and daughter do not view cultural heritage in the same way, thus there is a conflict. The daughter Dee is educated, bright, and attractive, but is strong willed and seems to have always intimidated her mother and her passive sister. At the end of the story, her mother stands up to her, however, and refuses to give Dee the quilts that she wants to display on her wall as symbols of her heritage [5].

Both Kiswana in Gloria Naylor's "Kiswana Browne" and her mother are strong women. Kiswana drops out of college and lives in a poor part of town to identify with her people, much to the dismay of her family who are well to do and live in a classy neighborhood. Kiswana has changed her name, but her mother still addresses her as Melanie. The name change adds to the rift between mother and daughter. Her mother's concern for her shows through when she tries to persuade Kiswana to accept some money to help her out of her apparent poverty [6].

Another strong character is depicted in Hazel Peoples in Toni Bambara's "My Man Bovanne." Hazel reacts strongly to the criticisms leveled at her by her children, particularly her daughter Elo, because they feel she has embarrassed them by dancing chest-to-chest with the blind Mr. Bovanne. Miss Hazel's children represent a new movement, but Hazel is adamant about the role of the grass roots in the community that the young try to exploit for their own aims. The clash between offspring and parents seems to be associated with the acquisition of new ideas and also with the fact that the younger generation is engaged in a search for a new identity. The older generation, however, tends to be "content" with the status quo [7].

African men, especially the traditional ones, are portrayed as authority figures as well as owners of women. And the higher up

they are on the social strata, the more power they wield, and the more powerful they are presumed to be. An irresponsible man is still a "man" by virtue of his position in society. Unfortunately, power and corruption seem to go hand in hand as is seen in the fiction of major African writers [8].

It is interesting how Trevor, an English colonial government officer, who in some way almost fits this profile, is portrayed. During his three years in an African country, he lives with Marie as a companion. Although he is already engaged to Denise in England, he lives an easy and warm life with Marie, and together they have a son, Tambah. Marie and Denise are exact opposites: one is illiterate, the other is educated; one is obedient, the other is self-fulfilled and feminist; one is soft and pliable, and the other is stern and hard. After the three years are over, Trevor must return to England to Denise but with great trepidation. He behaved responsibly, however, by settling with Marie, i.e., amply providing for her and Tambah.

African American men are generally not depicted as strong characters. They are irresponsible, alienated, confused and angry. Elijah in Cyrus Colter's "The Beach Umbrella" is characterized, for example, as the epitome of defeat and dejection. He likes to go to the beach and mingle; the rest of his family do not care for the beach. He decides that if he has a nice umbrella, he will become popular at the beach. But he has no money because his wife takes his paycheck and gives him just a little cash for gasoline and cigarettes. He borrows money from Randall, his son, buys an umbrella, and goes to the beach and has a good time. Then he realizes that he has no way to repay his son; he tries unsuccessfully to sell the umbrella [9].

Barclay, in "Truant" by Claude McKay, due to irresponsible actions, does not realize his grand adolescent dream of becoming a college graduate. Instead of applying himself to his studies, he is caught up in the lighter side of things: partying. And to make matters worse, the woman who has been working to put him through school becomes pregnant. Barclay drops out of college and works on the train as a waiter in charge of the pantry. At first his job is adventurous and exciting; he even gets enough money to support his family and his wife's social life. But the romance of train travel dissipates, and he decides to give it up, and he also deserts his family. It is shocking how he sneaks out on his baby girl whom he leaves asleep while his wife is out socializing: He thought he heard the child stir. He dared not look. He checked the door and stepped out. Where? Destination did not matter. Maybe his true life lay in eternal inquietude.

Wendell in "Son in the Afternoon" by John A Williams is bitterly angry; in fact, he has nursed his anger for many years because of the lack of attention he feels he deserved from his mother as a child. His mother had always worked for white people, even when she did not need to. As a maid, she gave her affection to white children. Wendell takes out his frustration on the Couchman's little son, Ronnie, by kissing the drunken Mrs. Couchman in Ronnie's presence; and he reflects, "no matter how his mother explains it away, the kid has the image - the colored guy and his mother - for the rest of his life.

Some male characters demonstrate an element of strength. Warner in Robert Bole's "What's Your Problem?" is an example. Warner has recently moved into a new neighborhood. His white neighbor's son drowns his dog in the washing machine—apparently, he has an unexplained "problem." The neighbors do not want to deal with their son and his problem, so they ask Warner to take care of it for them because they know that Warner has some rapport with their son. Warner adamantly tells the distressed couple that what happened is none of his business and they should get someone else to do their dirty work [10].

Another example of inner strength is demonstrated by Lee Mosely in Charles Wright's "A New Day." He has just been employed by a white woman who happens to be southern. He has a well-paying job, but he accepts it with trepidation. His new boss tests him by calling him "Nigger," while he is having his meal. This angers him, but instead of responding right away, he bides his time. Ironically, when he does respond, Mrs. Maude T. Davis notes that she and Lee are going to work well together: "I like people who think before they answer," she says.

A major problem facing African American men is related to the fact that they are the breadwinners and are thus expected to provide for their families. The women's role is generally that of the homemaker, but some women capitalize on this and thus carve out for themselves a comfort zone. The wives of well-to-do men in "The Lookout" by Cyrus Colter are socialites who get together to show off their clothes and cars and play bridge. Even women whose husbands have no wealth to speak of expect to be well taken care of. Rhoda, the wife of Barclay, the waiter on the train, is apparently devoted to a social life of sorts. In fact, when Barclay stays away from work, she is concerned not only about her family but about her "social position."

As an addendum, I would like to make a brief reference to light-skin-color alienation which pervades much of short black fiction by African American writers. Even though linked to black men, alienation affects women as well. Alienation is at the heart of problems facing mixed-race African Americans, and it pervades their whole perspective on life and how people relate to them. First and foremost, they are alienated from both blacks and whites. Esther, in Jean Toomer's story by the same name, is portrayed as the quintessential example of alienation. She thinks about men, but she has no appeal to them. She even goes out of her way to try to throw herself at the hideous King Barlo, a kind of black prophet. Barlo rejects her outright: "well, I'm sholy damned-skuse me but what brought you here, lil milk-white gal? ... This ain't the place fer y. This ain't the place fer y." She is ridiculed at the bar for her gall, and when she leaves "there is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared," suggesting complete alienation.

Another example is Willard Morley's "The Almost White Boy," a young mixed-race man who moved back and forth across the color

line. He even had a white girlfriend whom he thought would accept his marriage proposal. But as soon as he popped the question, the relationship came to an immediate end.

In this paper an attempt was made to highlight some of the characteristics that seem to set the African female apart from the African American female and the African male apart from the African American male as they are depicted in short black fiction. This discussion barely touches the surface in view of the fact that black short fiction covers a range of subjects. The ways these themes are treated reveals both the historically conditioned peculiarities of the black experience, as well as the characteristics of the African and the African American personality. The African short story is valid as a genre of African literature because it sheds light on the human condition in Africa (and covers topics ranging from art, religion, tradition, and culture to urban life, politics, apartheid, and life ironies). The African American short story is also legitimate as a genre treating issues relevant to the experiences of African Americans in this country. Much of course, can be found in the literature about the socio-cultural milieu as well as the historical factors underlying black expression and experience. Amen.

### Acknowledgment

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### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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