

## Unraveling Gender Dynamics: Rita Dove's Poetry through a Psychoanalytic Feminist Lens

### ABSTRACT

*This research paper aims to investigate the ideas about gender roles, sexuality and gender expression in the poems of Afro-American contemporary poetess Rita Dove, in the backdrop of the psychoanalytic feminism. The theory enables us to uncover layers of meaning related to gender dynamics, desires for artistic recognition, and the negotiation of identity. Moreover, it aspires to identify how her poems link together her sense of self with her affinity towards her Black sisterhood and her view of a contemporary woman's loyalty to her biological identity and her roles ordered by the American culture of the 90's onwards, when Rita Dove (1953-present) was enjoying the peak of her poetic career. The study hopes to qualitatively analyze the poet's concept of womanhood, the limitations of being one and what possibilities are stipulated by her for women of this time and age so that wo-men may coexist for a healthy society's burgeoning.*

**Keywords:** *gender dynamics, identity, sexuality, feminism, womanhood, poetry*

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## **Introduction**

The first two waves of feminism provoked extensive theoretical discussion about women's oppression, the nature of gender, and the role of women in a family, gender discrimination, and the nature of equality. In the late 1960s', women's rights movement took a different route; as a civil rights movement it raised the issue of women rights such as the right to her body and procreation. Shulmaith (2010), a radical feminist, published *The Dialectic of Sex* insisting upon intimate shackles between women and the men they loved and despised. It is also argued that the sexual repression of women cuts them off from the creative energy they need to be independent and self-fulfilled.

As reported by Teslaar (2019) Freud believed that women were fake as they often resort to pretending when they fake satisfaction for pleasing the male counterpart, sleeplessness or thinking about the daytime incidents at night is a symptom of psychological neurosis as per the psychologist. Psychoanalytical theory also reports a guilty psychic complex at not desiring to submit to the desired socio-ethical conduct. As per Freud's belief that such pangs of guilt are forgotten by children but form a part of repressed childhood memories. Dettner (1911) is quoted by Teslaar (2019) to have said that confessions and memories can be considered as a person's attempts to appease themselves, just as confessions of Beulah do, she reminisces over her sins on her death bed as narrated by Rita Dove in her famous anthology.

This study takes into the consideration how Rita Dove explores the feminine characters within the purview of Black poets, and why she has remained silent on the issue of color for more than a decade according to critics. This analysis allows the researcher to portray Rita Dove's views, demonstrate her dexterity to portray women constrained by the American cultural expectations.

Since the poet has been quiet about the issue of color for ten years, a time she was enjoying a politically powerful position in the academia, therefore the paper focusses on studying her poems within the theoretical framework of psychoanalytic feminist theory to explore the reason for her quietude or otherwise for women emancipation. Pat Righelato (2008) very significantly notes Dove's "silence for thirteen years"<sup>1</sup> about the oppression of black women.

## **Problem Statement**

The poet has been quiet about the issue of color for ten years, as commented by her critics that she has been enjoying a politically powerful position in the academia for the last thirty years. Hence, the paper focusses on studying her poems within the theoretical framework of psychoanalytic feminist theory to explore the reason for her quietude. Collins (2005) maintains that there are

two major reasons for the women of the Black race quietude: "Within U.S. Black intellectual communities generally and Black studies scholarship in particular, Black women's sexuality is either ignored or included primarily in relation to African-American men's issues, and their own needs are put second by the counsel (Thought 134)."<sup>1</sup> The reason for the choice of theoretical framework of psychoanalytic feminism is also to explore the her poems to study poet's identity, fragmentation, and self-consciousness.

### Significance of the Study

Psychoanalysis develops a theory of the unconscious that links sexuality and subjectivity of women together. In doing so, it discloses the ways in which the poet's self, and her political loyalties and attachments, are influenced by unconscious drives, hence the researcher taps the theory for an ideational study of the poet.

The study contextualizes the gender dynamics of last two decades and draws parallels with contemporary gender struggles. This study is significant because Feminist psychoanalytic studies often center on male authors, leaving gap for deeper exploration of female authors' psychological landscapes. It addresses the intersection of gender with race, class, and sexuality in a psychoanalytic feminist context during the "me too" age or fourth wave of feminism, where biological identities have become blurred.

### Research Objectives and Research Questions

This robust study aims to study how the poetry of Afro-American poet Rita Dove can be studied in the framework of psychoanalytic feminism and if stereotypical characterizations of women appear in Dove's poetry.

The research questions framed for this study are:

1. Is a feminine imagery used by the poetess? If so, what is the significance of such imagery?
2. Do any stereotypical characterizations of women appear in her poems?

### Data Selection

The researcher has selected ten poems, a few from the poetess' anthology *Thomas and Beulah*, printed in 1987 and some published more recently. These poems were carefully selected to reflect writer's psyche, shaped by patriarchal structures, and how the poems inform their representation of female characters and gender roles.

Since the study investigates how unconscious biases and cultural constructs manifest in literary works (Cixous, 1975), therefore the verses are selected on the basis of the poetess raising marginalized voice, and if her

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, P. H. (2005). Black women and motherhood. In *Motherhood and space* (pp. 149-159). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

insights and feminist themes provide a framework to critique gender stereotypes perpetuated in literature or challenge male-centric literary canons (Irigaray, 1985).

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The researcher has selected qualitative research method to analyze a collection of poems from her career making book *Thomas and Beulah*, to explore feminist psychoanalytic themes in her oeuvre. The nature of this research is exploratory. Campbell (2014) views that by using a qualitative research method, one can add quality information to the literary canon. The discovery of data in the form of ten selected poems aspires to study whether Rita Dove is a feminist or not.

Combining feminism and psychoanalysis has been a significant intellectual pursuit in critical theory. This interdisciplinary engagement critiques and adapts psychoanalytic frameworks to explore issues of gender, identity, and power dynamics from a feminist perspective. Psychoanalysis, particularly Freudian and Lacanian theories, are tools with which to analyze gender and identities. These theories reflect how identities are constructed and internalized through language and poetess' thoughts in the unconscious.

Each of these intellectual approaches are based on indicators like "repression, in psychoanalytic theory, the exclusion of distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings from the conscious mind. Often sexual or aggressive childhood memories, are unwanted mental contents that are pushed back into the unconscious mind to minimize pain and anxiety."<sup>2</sup> Both Freud and Jung (2003) intellectualize this repression to be the body's defense mechanism to avoid re-living the traumatic memories repeatedly. Julia Kristeva (1980) argues that women's marginalization is rooted in language and culture, and accessing the semiotic can subvert patriarchal norms.

Judith Butler (1990) reinterprets Freud and Lacan to argue that gender is a culturally produced illusion maintained by repeated social performances.

Since Simon De Beauvoir's view of gender is 'sociologically construed.' She acknowledges psychoanalysis's insights into female subjectivity, she critiques its deterministic portrayal of women as "other" in a male-centered framework (Beauvoir, 1949). Reinterpreting psychoanalysis allows for a deeper understanding of women's psychological struggles, the theorist asserts.

Beauvoir, as well as Freud, affirm human subjects to possess a mind/body dualism. Feminism as per Beauvoir is not merely about an imprisoned

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<sup>2</sup> Knox, J. (2003). Trauma and defences: Their roots in relationship: An overview. *Journal of Analytical psychology*, 48(2), 207–233.

women's objectivity as a result of her construal by the society. Carl Jung, Freud, and Beauvoir are conscious of a child's bondage with both mother and father; how the family life impacts upon a child's mind is crucial; how it makes meanings of family situation and of the world resonates with how it establishes relations with the larger world, how mother-child relationship dynamics work.

Therefore, this study will enhance a deeper understanding of Dove's portrayal of feminine existence. Contrarily, Lacan (1977) reduces women to the role of "other" and negates their subjectivity. Butler (1990) critiques Lacan's essentialism, arguing that gender identity is performative rather than fixed. She uses Lacanian theory to examine how societal norms enforce gender binaries. She critiques Lacan for not addressing lived experiences and material realities of women.

## **Literature Review**

The concepts of self as whole or in discord reflect psychoanalytic explorations of identity, fragmentation, and self-awareness. The following markers have been applied to this robust study for in-depth analysis of Rita Dove's poems within the frame work of psychoanalytic feminism.

A gap was found in the literature of psychoanalytic theory, The choice of the psychoanalytic theory was made to bring to the table a woman's psycho-analysis from a female's perspective to compare and contrast the insights on the subject given mostly by men.

### **Psychoanalytic Feminist Theories are a Reflection of a Woman's Unconscious States**

The article studies the poems of Rita Dove in the backdrop of feminist psychoanalysis emphasizing upon the poet as a subject. It endeavors to study the relationship between the psyche of the poetess that are viewed in the identity of female characters, within the coeval American culture. This article analyzes the poems in the feminist psychoanalytic theory of Black women particularly which is born out of self-reflection as proposed by Freud (1897-1939). Monte (1977) assumes that the Psychoanalytic feminist theories are a reflection of a woman's unconscious states that urge them to act in a certain way (Beneath the Mask, 8) i.e., self-reflection results in a new sensitization about the inequities present in their societies.

### **Gender and Identity**

Psychoanalytic feminism examines how gender identity is formed through unconscious processes and societal structures, often focusing on the interplay between the personal psyche and cultural norms. Alfred Adler (1870-1937)

views man to be social being, motivated by social needs, Hossein (2017) mentions that “we are self-conscious and capable of improving ourselves and the world around us (McConnell, 250).”<sup>3</sup> Rita Dove’s career making book ‘Thomas and Beulah’(1986) examines the articulation of the female character Beulah’s anxieties and her genuflection in a society that believed in white supremacy and gives us a perspective on the Black women as sex objects as a result of the racial formations.

### **Gender a Societal Construct**

Simon De Beauvoir (2013) alleges a fixed destiny to women as a consequence of societal dictates and her biological constitution, one of a “conflict between subjectivity and femininity.”<sup>4</sup> To psychoanalytic feminists the characteristics of femininity and subjectivity are ineluctable and incompatible. Hence denying an “existential freedom” to them.

### **Agency, Representation or Marginalization**

Sandra Harding (2007) argued that women represent a disadvantaged social group, who are oppressed by harmful gender biases. Judith Butler (1990) views gender to be a sort of performance, acted out repeatedly, these roles get solidified in time. She believes that claims about women, gender ought to be changed as they strengthen patriarchy or the dominant groups as a consequence. The third-wave feminists regarded women to be a product of biology, the second wave proponents of 1960s onwards gender is the creation of one’s habitat or culture. Whereas the third wave feminists question the very idea of essential female characteristics. Feminist psychoanalysis often critiques the marginalization of women and other oppressed groups, analyzing how unconscious biases and societal norms perpetuate systemic inequalities.

### **Gender a Performative Role?**

The poetess under study does highlight that a male figure is always dominant, even if it is in the form of a silhouette, theorists may view this to be a woman’s problem. Freud (1968, 116) views women to be an enigma rather “the problem” (113). He is found offering the women an advice to be “more masculine than feminine” (117). Sigmund Freud (1895) theorizes sexual needs to be normal and the most needed biological urge among humans in addition to the needs for food, shelter and warmth. Freud also asserts that in matrimony, the psychoanalysis behind males’ psyche is that they seek pleasure and may indulge in pleasure seeking activities outside if there are

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<sup>3</sup> Hossain, M. (2017). Psychoanalytic theory used in English literature: A descriptive study. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: Linguistics & Education*, 17(1), 41-46.

<sup>4</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (2013). *AND THE SECOND SEX. When Sex Became Gender*.

problems at home. Hossain (2017) relates a woman's possessive behavior to be a woman's "neurotic behavior that is not random or meaningless but goal-directed."<sup>5</sup> Hossain (2017) like Freud is of the view that human behavior is motivated by "neurological representations"<sup>6</sup> of their instincts. Women are regarded to be problematic and 'fake', even faking pleasure to deceive their companion by Freud.

He posits that the behavior of an adult can be contextualized taking in consideration their childhood, and standards of morality, or 'wrong' and 'right' are either reinforced by culture or by one's parents and is stored in the part of one's psyche called ego. The choice of the psychoanalytic theory was made to bring to the table a woman's psycho-analysis from a female's perspective.

### Self- Conscious Whole or a Divided Self?

A divided self may emerge as an application of these psychoanalytic insights. The self-consciousness that women are mothers or have a biological role to perform may have a positive as well as a negative impact on the poetess' psyche. Julia Kristeva (2021) challenges Freudian "Oedipal exclusion of maternal dependency"<sup>7</sup> emphasizing that femininity cannot be disentangled from the mother's biological and social role. She views a self-division or self-discord in the ethics of psychoanalysis; a strangeness to oneself, for "establishing an ethical relation to alterity, inviting it into our political bonds (and warding off the most virulent forms of abjection)."<sup>8</sup> Whereas Irigaray (2011) aims to introduce sexual difference into the social contract, so that there is no self-discord and her difference from the male gender is embraced.

### Gender and Color

Vance (1984) studies Black feminism in particular, assuring that all "women internalize conventional cultural demands about appropriate sexual attitudes and behavior; those who do not conform to coercive values about demure heterosexuality, faithful marriage and motherhood are deemed as 'bad' women."<sup>9</sup> Marshall (2005) asserts that "enslavement of Black women has been socially constructed in antithesis to that of white women."<sup>10</sup> Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe (1985); and Marshall (1976, 1994) emphasize that women

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

<sup>7</sup> Slipp, S. (1993). *The Freudian mystique: Freud, women, and feminism*. NYU Press.

<sup>8</sup> <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Vance, C. S. (1984). Pleasure and danger: Toward a politics of sexuality. *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality*, 1(3).

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, A. (2005). *From sexual denigration to self-respect: Resisting images of black female sexuality* (pp. 21–52). Routledge.

of color are portrayed as promiscuous, and physically and psychologically diseased due to sexual denigration. The space occupied by Black women is the pink space views Booth (1996); it's a troubled space complementing the "etymological roots of the word - to be pinked or pierced, stabbed, wounded, beaten."<sup>11</sup>

Evelynn M. Hammond (2017) sets forth a powerful argument that women of Black origin are aggressively oversexed is a racial myth, and their silence about it, is questionable too. She further expounds that:

"Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a process that black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body - the maimed, immoral, black female body - which can be and is still being used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects."<sup>12</sup>

Collins (1990) regards "Black feminist thought as an emerging power as well as agents of knowledge."<sup>13</sup> Patricia (1990) is aware of these women as "self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression."<sup>14</sup> Luce Irigaray (2007) an Afrocentric feminist posits that men and women will always co-exist, the two must however interrelate, she believes that "a masculine way of relationality does not and cannot recognize, acknowledge, or approach a sexuate other. An *Other* that is different and remains difference in desire or in love."<sup>15</sup> Irigaray pens down the fact that "we make our own what we approach, what approaches us,"<sup>16</sup> asserting that the women "want to have the entire world in our head, sometimes the entire world in our heart. We do not see that this gesture transforms the life of this world into something finished, dead, because the world loses its own life, a life always foreign to us, exterior to us, other than us."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Booth, A. (1996). Abduction and Other Severe Pleasures: Rita Dove's "Mother Love". *Callaloo*, 19(1), 125–130.

<sup>12</sup> Hammonds, E. M. (2017). *Toward a genealogy of black female sexuality: The problematic of silence* (pp. 93-104). Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, P. H. (2002). What's going on? Black feminist thought and the politics of postmodernism. In *working the ruins* (pp. 47–79). Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, P. H. (1990). Black feminist thought in the matrix of domination. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, 138(1990), 221–238.

<sup>15</sup> Howie, G. (2007). Interview with Luce Irigaray. In *Third Wave Feminism* (pp. 283–291). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Howie, G. (2007). Interview with Luce Irigaray. In *Third Wave Feminism* (pp. 283–291). Palgrave Macmillan, London.



While traditional psychoanalysis did not explicitly address race, contemporary feminist psychoanalytic studies often incorporate intersectionality to explore how gendered and racialized identities intersect in the unconscious and cultural narratives.

### **Women as Objects of Gaze**

Luce Irigaray (2007) observes a woman to be the object of two types of "gaze" one is a patriarchal one and the other is that of a self-reflection. Thus, the female gender must take the responsibility of liberating themselves from this subjectivity so that they become "divine women," these are women who think. She further states that it can only be done by their "re-connecting the spirit with the breath, the body and nature."<sup>18</sup> She however urges women not to give up their feminine traits. She is of the opinion that women should not be like men, neither should the sexual differences be eliminated, but their differences should not be used to subordinate women.

Psychoanalytic feminism focusses on the "male gaze" (à la Laura Mulvey) and how women's identities are shaped by being observed and objectified.

### **Fragmentation or Healing?**

The concepts of self as whole or in discord reflect psychoanalytic explorations of identity, fragmentation, and self-awareness. An encounter with one's self is termed by Lacan to be a *tuché*, or a real encounter, which is always a traumatic experience (Lacan 53-54, 73) that is actually a re-awakening.<sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva (1980) opines that femininity cannot be disentangled from the motherhood, its blessings and challenges both. She explores how gender identity is formed through unconscious processes and societal structures, often focusing on the interplay between the personal psyche and cultural norms.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Rita Dove brings to light her distinct perspective of gender and black identity in her oeuvres. The aim of this study is to explore how her poems exhibit a realization of double consciousness of being an Afro-American and a woman. The matter of her double consciousness and her examination of the role of black color in the formation of her ethnocentric identity can be examined in the poem 'Small Town' (1995) where she examines the female protagonist from a distance. Dove claims that the woman is "indistinct, in the

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<sup>18</sup> Skof, L., & Holmes, E. A. (Eds.). (2013). *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*. A&C Black.

<sup>19</sup> Reinhard, K. (1999). Lacan and Monotheism: Psychoanalysis and the Traversal of Cultural Fantasy. *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 3(1-2).

doorway" (3)<sup>20</sup> thus no identity could be attributed to her as the poet states that "There is no way of telling who it is"<sup>21</sup>.

The female form in the *Small Town* (1995) is confined within her home, she is blurred or indistinct because she is held in captivity and cannot fight for her independence. The narrator yearns for the masculine power that exudes from the strong male character positioned conspicuously. Dove's consciousness of the powerful patriarchal structure enables her to recognize the aggressive male arrogantly standing outside, yearning in her heart to be distinctly seen as well as be valued like him.

The male protagonist however can be distinctly seen from afar, thus emphasizing his clear form that can be viewed distinctly from afar establishing his power, whereas the blurred figure inside is a 'someone sitting in the red house.' The skillful poet uses this technique to establish upon the reader that she places herself outside the scene, so that she is able to get a panoramic view with her objective gaze and narrates the story as she witnesses them from a distance. The impact of the poet's gaze is also visible in the 'Magenta Colored Girl.' (1993)

In 'Motherhood', (2001) the poetess portrays a young black girl standing with her eyes cast down, an image of innocence. The accumulated fluff in her hair and the bruised cheek are visible signs of her violent confrontation with a predator. Rita Dove deconstructs the identity of the girl who is bruised both emotionally as well as physically, implied by the metaphorical use of the color 'magenta' which is a combination of red and black, suggestive of both; her entry into motherhood as well as her virginity being violently smashed.

The dexterity of the poetess' use of a historical frame with the help of metaphor and imagery, is evident in the clever use of the phrase 'pink is magenta'. The etymological use of the word 'pink' is skillful as the word pink originally means "to pierce, puncture or stab with a pointed weapon."<sup>22</sup> Thus entailing the victimization of young black women who is violently forced to cross over the psycho-spatial domain of the *Other* through racial censure by the oppressors, who may even be their own mulatto fathers.

Rita Dove shows male characters as well as black mulattos satisfying their biological needs with their own daughters. The theme of miscegenation is also explored in 'Motherhood' (2001) that points towards a flawed and weaker family unit that emerge out of interracial marriages that may end in rage, grief, or deceptive calm.

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<sup>20</sup> Dove, R. (1979). *Small Town*. *The Georgia Review*, 33(4), 805-805.

<sup>21</sup> Righelato, P. (2008). Rita Dove and the Art of History. *Callaloo*, 31(3), 760-775. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27654903>

<sup>22</sup> [etymonline.com/word/pink](http://etymonline.com/word/pink), 2021

Rita Dove deconstructs female identity by explaining to her daughter in "Mickey in the Night Kitchen" (2013) that female identity is constructed by the society. This poem portrays that girls are impregnated by certain notions in childhood. The poem portrays an interaction between a young girl child aged three and her mother. The child is intrigued by her anatomy and out of curiosity, desires to examine her mother's private body part. Upon discovery of sameness, she runs away exclaiming "we are pink." The use of the word "pink" is ironically used here, as it suggests that her culture has impregnated a gender-bias in her mind. Frassanito & Pettorini (2008) state "that the construction of feminist identity by color coding it with a shade of pink is a recent 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American phenomenon."<sup>23</sup>

Rita Dove's use of the color pink and that of the trope 'gaze' is quite complex. With a Semiotic insight, a gaze may signify a look of incest or admiration. In 'Small Town' the gaze of the poetess is one of denial of the feminine in oneself. Rita Dove rejects feminine traits by focusing her gaze on nurturing masculine ones, explaining to the girl that pink or not we are all the same, consequently preparing her mind about the cultural beliefs.

A gaze is also a psychoanalytical term used by Lacan (2015) to describe one's anxious mental state. The 'Magenta Colored Girl' is depicted as a traumatized girl trying to avert her mother's gaze, who "howls" upon her inability to defend her daughter's honor, when she views her disheveled appearance and blood-stained clothes. The girl looks down, avoiding her mother's eyes. Her downward gaze is also indicative of her coping with the stressful traumatic experience that she has undergone recently and desires to share it with no one, not even her mother. Her mother who has lived through the trauma of sexual violence knows that this averted gaze is also indicative of a vulnerable black child's powerlessness against oppression as well as her hostility towards her mother, as predicted by Freud, which is a defining moment in her psychological development. Tait (2015) aptly sums up the situation by stating that "the downward gaze as a militant stance - a subversive survival technique that protected them (Black race) from direct confrontation with the racist and patriarchal gaze."<sup>24</sup>

Rita Dove is product of a liberal American culture. Her 'liberal' identity is evident in her poems about her anatomy. Liberal values are characteristically centered on one's body image and innate rights as well as open expression about personal wants and desires. The poetess seems to be unashamed of her body image like other Black writers of the like Lucille Clifton. A large flaring pelvic bone may ease in childbirth but by contemporary standards a petite

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<sup>23</sup> Frassanito, P., & Pettorini, B. (2008). Pink and blue: The color of gender. *Child's Nervous System*, 24(8), 881-882.

<sup>24</sup> Tait, A. (2015). INNOCENCE & FURY: Reading the Pink in Rita Dove's "Mother Love". *Obsidian*, 41(1/2), 348-370.

woman is considered pretty, the poetess declares frankly that her wide cox is neither a cause of embarrassment nor low esteem for her, as she is neither concerned with conforming to the contemporary standards of white feminine beauty nor is she body shamed because her lady part.

Self-confidence in her womanhood can also be read as a more specific rejection of racist ideals that give more power and privilege to slim and petite white female bodies. The poetess' remarks about a woman's role of a caregiver are a clear affirmation of her upholding a facade of dignity in the role of a mother in an oppressive culture. As *Thomas and Beulah* was published around the time when the second wave of feminism was at full swing; it asserts power of women as a gender who performs a life-giving role, men are unable to perform. She uses the hip motif to exhibit a woman's power to enthrall a man "spinning him like a top"<sup>25</sup> as well as carry her child over her back or tossed over her strong hips.

The use of hip motif is also suggestive of her right to her body as well as the reproductive rights the women were fighting for in America. The predominant themes are wounded psyche of a mother who loses her child, pains of motherhood or child rearing, and sexual exploitation of women. Dove's protagonist Demeter identifies the pains and joys of motherhood and the instinctive love infused in a woman's heart; "Toss me a baby and without bothering to blink I'll catch her, sling him on a hip (2- 3)." <sup>26</sup>Rita Dove points out that a female's maternal instincts get triggered, upon the realization that they are needed. At the sound of "duty bugles ... we'll climb out of exhaustion every time, bare the nipple or tuck in the sheet, heat the milk and hum at bedside until (4 -8)" <sup>27</sup>The poetess also comments that "Fledgling heroes"<sup>28</sup> (line 11) take advantage of naïve girls; who are gendered and primed by the society to appear pleasantly groomed and affectionate for acceptance in the patriarchal society.

Rita Dove counters the issue of a Black woman's oppression by patriarchy in "The Venus of Willendorf," and "Freedom: Bird's-Eye View" published in the collection *'On the Bus with Rosa Parks (1999)'*. In "The Venus of Willendorf," Dove narrates the life of a young enlightened American girl, who is a subject of her professor's patriarchal gaze. She gains a new insight in a moment of awakening in successive stages; initially when she looks at the beautifully carved porcelain statue; secondly when she experiences the male gaze admiring her with lust as she walks down the road in her hometown and

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<sup>25</sup> Dove, R. (Ed.). (2011). *The Penguin anthology of twentieth-century American poetry*. Penguin Group USA.

<sup>26</sup> Dove, R. (1986). Daystar. In Wanger-Martin, L & Davidson, C. N. (Eds.), *The Oxford book of women's writing in the United States* (pp. 300-301). New York: Oxford

<sup>27</sup> ibid

<sup>28</sup> ibid

finally, when the student in a moment of spiritual awakening seems to whisper in her ear, don't be like me. This poem explores an educated black woman's initial silence about their own sexuality and desire, who stands for her right and decides to raise her voice against her professor's harassment. On the other hand, his wife is unaware of how patriarchy objectifies and decides to follow the patriarchal norms, personified in the professor:

"Where thou goest, there I went also On the Bus (l .50)." <sup>29</sup>

Rita Dove's poem "Canary in bloom, (2008)" portrays a vocalist, who despite being a woman is able to retain her dignified space in a patriarchal culture, by faking an image that wins gain her patriarchal society's approval. On the other hand, the poetess from another collection *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* highlights her stance that "women and blacks have the right to freedom and the right to be subjects." The poetess asserts through the characters in "Canary (2012)," that stereotype images of victims of race and patriarchal discourse ought to assert their own will and endeavor to become subjects capable of philosophical reflection like their counterparts, the white female subjects.

Alternately, Dove highlights the difference between a male gaze and that of a woman, citing the verses by the poet Paul Celan to interact with the other "you" (51) in order to dream big:

"Let your eye be a candle in the chamber,  
your gaze a wick,  
let me be blind enough to ignite it.  
No. Let it be otherwise.  
Step from your house,  
harness your dappled dream,  
let its hooves speak to the snow you blew off the ridge of my soul. (51)" <sup>30</sup>

*Thomas and Beulah* (1986) is Rita Dove's major work that earned her a Pulitzer Prize the next year. Dove's portrayal of the female character Beulah is overshadowed by Thomas, her husband. This book is a record of a black couple struggling in a racist America of pre-Depression era. Unlike the contemporary women, Beulah is confined to a home, and uses her imprisoned condition to reflect on her condition, and her married life. She uses the domestic work as a time to think about her past and the gap that isolates her from her husband. As she dusts away the objects in her house,

<sup>29</sup> Tso, Yi-Hsuan. "The Gaze and Female Subjectivity in Rita Dove's Poetry." *Feminist Studies in English Literature* 19, no. 1 (2011): 149–175.

<sup>30</sup> Dove, R. (1992). The Venus of Willendorf. *Poetry*, 161(1), 25–27.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20603351>

she is portrayed by the poetess as a woman who grapples with dreams of personal freedom and her domestic obligations; reflecting a woman's maternal ambivalence, that she rarely discusses openly.

Her domestic chores cease and she begins to fly to Paris on the wings of her imagination as if she ceases to be a domestic worker, even a wife who depends upon her husband to mediate with the world. The poem 'Dusting' is a testament to her hardworking magical hands polishing the household objects with utmost devotion, till they gleam:

"Every day a wilderness—  
no shade in sight.  
Beulah patient among knickknacks,  
the solarium a rage of light,  
a grain storm  
as her gray cloth brings dark wood to life. (402, p. 52)" \_Marriage<sup>31</sup>

Quashie (2018) views the focus of the book is on an oppressed black wife portrayed in Thomas and Beulah and less on racial authenticity. The critic examines Rita Dove portraying a suppressed Beulah;

"Especially examination of (Beulah's poems) their poetic qualities and ideological consideration of Beulah's subjectivity. Indeed, the Beulah poems are demoted further through the gendered sequestration of marriage and domesticity."<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Lynn Keller (1997) declares Beulah's imagination to be "domestic enclosure"<sup>33</sup> of a woman sequestered to her husband for life. Quaishi (2018) observes the Black couple's

"Marriage as neither a salvation, racial or otherwise; instead, the collection privileges each character separately in the deep integrity of their memories, their losses, their regrets, a beautiful solitariness,"<sup>34</sup> eroding the couple's life.

Both the characters are shown through their juvenile years, marital life, up to the occasion of their deaths. John Shoptaw (2018) observes Beulah's

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<sup>31</sup> Shoptaw, J. (1987, October). Thomas and Beulah. In *Black American Literature Forum* (Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 335–341). St. Louis University.

<sup>32</sup> Quashie, K. (2018). The Black Woman as Artist: The Queer Erotics of Rita Dove's Beulah. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 37(2), 39–418.

<sup>33</sup> Keller, L. (1997). *Forms of expansion: recent long poems by women*. University of Chicago Press. p 125, 131

<sup>34</sup> Quashie, K. (2018). The Black Woman as Artist: The Queer Erotics of Rita Dove's Beulah. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 37(2), 397–418.

“pessimistic solitariness” to be a result of her sequestration. Contrarily, she stubbornly pursues her dreams to visit Paris one day, unlike her husband Thomas who laments the loss of his boyhood friend Lem, Beulah stubbornly dreams of freedom along with her discharge of domestic duties. Similar to ‘Dusting’, ‘Daystar’(2021) depicts a woman in Beulah who is not only an earthy woman changing diapers but also a woman who amidst the discharge of maternal duties longs for a personal moment of ease for self-reflection:

“She wanted a little room for thinking:  
but she saw the diapers steaming on the line,  
a doll slumped behind the door. (p 61).”<sup>35</sup>

Since she is portrayed by the poetess /narrator as a woman who is neither an angelic mother nor a demonic wife, Beulah is depicted as a hardworking mother who can escape the mundane reality of domestic chores by artistically imagining the diapers on the washing line to be “steaming ” , like her desire to hide herself like “a doll slumped behind the door”<sup>36</sup> to escape the never ending domestic work she “lug[s] a chair behind the garage / to sit out the children’s naps,”<sup>37</sup> she is exploited of all freedom or responsibility for a moment of peace and solitude for herself because the very next moment her child appears “pouting from the top of the stairs”<sup>38</sup> demanding what the mother is doing in the backyard.

This episode is an echo of Simon de Beauvoir’s opinion that “Women are taught to renounce autonomy thus putting them in a vicious cycle; the less she exercises her freedom to act, the more she will affirm to be a subject.”<sup>39</sup> Beulah questions her semi-slavery as baneful and double in the closing lines of “Daystar” (2021) when lying on the bed at night she questions herself about her existence and her true place in the house, that she endeavors all day to turn into a palace. She connects the daytime incident in the backyard about her child questioning the reason of her hiding away from her involvement in household work, with her nocturnal role of a dutiful wife in bed at night. Connecting her roles on the same trajectory she questions if there is any place or should she strive for “building a palace”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Baldwin, E., (2021, August 3). Daystar by Rita Dove. *Poem Analysis*. Retrieved from <https://poemanalysis.com/rita-dove/daystar/>

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (2013). *AND THE SECOND SEX. When Sex Became Gender*, 165.

<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, E., (2021, August 3). Daystar by Rita Dove. *Poem Analysis*. Retrieved from <https://poemanalysis.com/rita-dove/daystar/>

in her dreams. She even makes her characters dance like a ballerina in her poem 'American Smooth' (2004) to ease their tensions away.

"Later that night when Thomas rolled over and lurched into her,  
she would open her eyes and think of the place that was hers for an  
hour—where she was nothing,  
pure nothing, in the middle of the day. (p. 61)"<sup>41</sup>

Beulah questions her existence that is in the mode of becoming all day long, a constant perpetual circle, in which only one center, the family and her roles as a caring mother and obedient wife exist. Rita Dove uses the narrator to delineate a woman who strains hard between affirming her singularity and denying it in the face of her multifaceted roles.

Davies (2016) comments upon Beulah's existentialism by repeating the word "nothing, as one enmeshed in the immateriality of being"<sup>42</sup> Keller (2018) also views Beulah's relationship between "gender and motherhood to be unconventional. Quashie (2013) comments upon the Black female's:

"Space of personal inwardness that is expressive and sovereign but not intentional. This "quality" or "sensitivity of being" is "quiet," a mindful potentiality that includes, but is not limited to, such attentive attitudes as non-passive waiting and patience. Not antithetical to protest, quiet is nevertheless welcoming to the "whimsy of the interior."<sup>43</sup>

Beulah pursues the quest for becoming a self-conscious being through narcissism, as well as be aware of her multifaceted roles of a dutiful mother and wife, juxtaposed against her personal goals of freedom that she appropriates, living a life of sequestration. Her marriage with Thomas is dysfunctional, who exhibits escapism, avoiding the problems he has in his domestic life by seeking interest such as visiting theatres and reminiscing his childhood friend Lem, who is with him no more. The poetess implies that the onus of a successful marriage is to be mostly born by a woman.

Freud (1968, 116) views women to be an enigma rather a "problem" (113) and offers them an advice to be "more masculine than feminine" (117). Rita Dove pens powerful images of womanhood. The poem "Company" (1991) voices the unseen speaker portraying Beulah's courage—in death/dying moment of her husband. Beulah is seen standing composed, at

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<sup>41</sup> Baldwin, E., (2021, August 3). Daystar by Rita Dove. *Poem Analysis*. Retrieved from <https://poemanalysis.com/rita-dove/daystar/>

<sup>42</sup> Davies, M. (2016). Material subjects and vital objects—Prefiguring property and rights for an entangled world. *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 22(2), 37–60.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, C. (2013). The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture by Kevin Quashie. *Common Knowledge*, 19(3), 578-578.



the bedside of a dying Thomas, urging him not to “give it up”, and assuring him about their dramatic life together with an assurance “listen: we were good,” portraying her kindness, not a romantic assessment of a couple trapped in less-than ideal marriage. Thus, towards the closing of the book, Beulah emerges as a mature self-consciousness in the making. The final poem is a

“The Oriental Ballerina” is objectified by a dying Beulah, who imagines watching the twirling Ballerina in fascination to the sounds of radio playing a morning hymn.

“The ballerina has been drilling all night!  
She flaunts her skirts like sails, whirling in a disk so bright. (pp. 75-76)”<sup>44</sup>  
.....as the windows—the walls are still dark,  
Shadowed with the ghosts of oversized gardenias.  
The ballerina pirouettes to the wheeze of the old rugged cross,  
She lifts her shoulders past the edge of the jewel box lid. (p. 75)”<sup>45</sup>  
Beulah whispers a last benediction:  
“There is no China;  
No cross, just the papery kiss of a kleenex above the stink of camphor,  
The walls exploding with shabby tutus (p. 77).”<sup>46</sup>

## Findings

Rita Dove challenges the poetry by Black women writers, exploring issues that were not hitherto considered within the purview of Black poetic culture, by employing the motifs of domestic space, music, and dancing ballerina in her poems. This analysis allows the researcher to demonstrate the poetess’ ability to move beyond cultural expectations and constraining feminist views so popular today. Dove portrays femininity to be a trajectory of the Oedipal Complex and indicates that one’s sexed identity is an achievement or an informed choice rather than a natural essence.

She does not present her female characters to be weak or hysterical, the Mother’s love portrays the strength of a mother who shows the audacity to kill for the sake of her daughter, threatening violent castration of the father “I’ll cut you down / just like the cedars of Lebanon.”<sup>47</sup> Dove’s characters portray an ambivalence towards motherhood, that she believes is not to be embarrassed about, because a woman’s grappling with her multifaceted household chores are useful in many ways ; enhancing her skills as well as

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<sup>44</sup> Dove, R. (1984). The Oriental Ballerina. *New England Review*, 7(1), 61–77

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

<sup>47</sup> Quashie, K. (2018). The Black Woman as Artist: The Queer Erotics of Rita Dove's Beulah. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 37(2), 397–418

well as her creativity. The poetess advises the Black mothers to embrace their role of procreation despite its complexity.

Jacques Lacan's theories emphasize a subject's relation to the Other through language, corresponds with Dove's poetics, which states that "poetry enlightens people about their relationships with other human beings" (Rita Dove (112)).<sup>48</sup> Through her female character's awakening encounter with the beautifully carved figurine Venus in the primal scene or 'tuché, the female student cognizes how she appears to the male' gaze and realizes that the women are objectified and misrepresented by the Patriarchal gaze. Dove portrays her female characters to be dynamic, capable of withstanding dehumanization by the patriarchal gaze. Hence, a new activism emerges after critiquing marginalization of Black women on the basis of biases and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequalities.

In Dove's poem, 'The Venus of Willendorf' the young black American woman, a university student resolves not to be an object in patriarchal. The initial stage of awareness in the female student is reached when the narrator gazes at the subject as the other. The second stage of consciousness is attained when the other touches the soul of the narrator indirectly, melting the layers to reach her unconscious soul underneath. Eventually, she counter's a self-gaze in a moment of transition when blown off by the other's gaze, the narrator's visual contact with an anonymous "you" in the first stanza in a private room, and the third stanza of Paul Celan's poem bring a reawakening to her that she ought to be a subject and not an object of the other's gaze. She resolves that "He won't dare touch me."<sup>49</sup> This is in accordance with psychoanalytic feminism's focus on women's identities shaped by being observed and objectified.

Dove's use of pink imagery in *Mother's Love* is very skillful. The poetess portrays Black women of all ages, enduring physical abuse, hatred and rape and urges them to overthrow hegemonic forces. She depicts a heroic mother in Motherhood whose mulatto husband makes an advance to rape his own daughter, his evil intentions are countered by the mother's intervention to protect her innocence but fails to do so eventually. Here, Rita Dove uses the color "pink" to show the torture that these women are subjected to when they are rape beaten. The word is used metaphorically for Black mother and daughter not to express feminist allure, which a black woman does not possess according to Booth (1996), but to be agents of change by raising awareness about families with a weak value system that assaults and tortures its own women.

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<sup>48</sup> Tso, Y. H. (2011). The Gaze and Female Subjectivity in Rita Dove's Poetry. *Feminist Studies in English Literature*, 19(1), 149–175.

<sup>49</sup> Dove, R. (1992). The Venus of Willendorf. *Poetry*, 161(1), 25–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20603351>

In Dove's *Two Poems*, the poem "Canary," (2012) delineates a female vocalist who retains her dignity by deliberately faking to be an enigmatic male so that she is able to win the patriarchal and dominating cultures' approval and thus enjoy freedom within the confines of the patriarchal perspective, as long as she deems necessary by being an indistinct and non-alluring female. She utters to herself "If you can't be free be a mystery."<sup>50</sup> Compared with Canary (1986), the *Two Poems* from Dove's '*On the Bus with Rosa Parks*' boldly assert that women and blacks have the right to freedom and the right to be subjects. Instead of seeking protection by succumbing to and perpetuating the patriarchal myth of women and blacks, as in her earlier poem "Canary," (1986) characters in Dove's two later poems demystify the patriarchal images of women in particular and blacks in general, by letting them become thinking subjects capable of philosophical reflection like their male and dominating counterparts.

Rita Dove exclaims ironically that despite racial prejudice so rampant in the world:

"I think nothing but "So I am white underneath!"<sup>51</sup>

Rita Dove views an American Black male to be one who is hardworking like the protagonist Thomas, who like any normal male has desires but like any other Black male his identity is shaped upon American dreams, he represses his pleasure-seeking instincts just like Thomas' psychological regression. She traces the trajectory of her book *Thomas and Beulah* to the American dream in the closing scene showing a dying Thomas who is unable to get out of the car. This potent scene ironically points towards a dream of self-improvement, the dream of a successful life at the cost of one's health that gets compromised through the capitalist lifestyle and booming economy, reflected by the brightly glowing neon signs of the chemist's shop. The closing scene can also be taken as repressing self-gratification in a quest for something larger. Dove clearly believes in gender roles; Thomas is depicted as one who works hard day and night to secure a comfortable lifestyle for his wife and four daughters, and Beulah gets irritable under the stress of her domestic work.

It can be claimed that Rita Dove observes women, particularly Black ones, to be complicit in compromising their freedom. She posits that girls are feminized in accordance with social expectations. However, Rita Dove believes that women must embrace their destinies as mothers, daughters and wives and not be chafed about it, instead. She views that only a self-conscious and enlightened woman capable of introspection can cognize that

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<sup>50</sup> Dove, R. (1986). Canary. *Tri Quarterly*, 67, 113.

<sup>51</sup> Vendler, H. (1994). Rita Dove: identity markers. *Callaloo*, 17(2), 381–398.

motherhood may be challenging that it catalyzes her awareness about her unrealized aspirations shown by the poetess' use of dream motif but at the same time, her maternal identity is strengthened by the love she receives from her offspring, that is a bundle of joy for her.

Dove adopts a condescending attitude towards the Black past as it is beyond control. But she does assign "an essence or determinate identity, the psychoanalytic reliance on sexual categories,"<sup>52</sup> in accordance with the Lacanian notion that renders woman as the other to a subject, as a subject herself, as well as granting existential freedom to her through genu reflection or self-gaze. Rita Dove is very much aware of a Black women's role in civilization, the volatile ground she treads upon, the sites of contention, oppression and a re-articulation of her role as a woman of post-modern age. Rita Dove assumes that 'normal' men will desire women and be desired by them but they can also repress these longings for the opposite sex by improving herself through education or hoarding fervently healthy desires for self-improvement just as Beulah does by keeping her dreams of a romantic life, prosperity and travelling "fire lit," in her heart. Rita Dove delineates heroic mothers in her poems, who nurture themselves as well as their offspring.

Rita Dove views the possibility of women as subjects, by seeing themselves through their own eyes, justifying their existence through their romantic relationships, and attempting to mirror men's being, by collaborating in the constitution of male subjectivities. She engages with her society by leveraging her creative expression as a means of resistance, empowerment, and connection.

## **Conclusion**

Rita Dove offers a distinctively psychical understanding of women, how her characters inhabit or mis-inhabit identities in their bodies. Her analysis is that although identities are biological and socially engineered but they must engage with society through creative expression as a poetess with multiple roles of an activist, mother and wife who raises a voice as means of resistance, empowerment, and establishing connections with all. There is a need to reorganize one's self by more philosophical reflection. Beulah's gender role is a trail blazer for women, who desire to re-conceptualize relationships by accepting a male's "sexual domination" so that he is obliged to treat her as an equal partner.

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<sup>52</sup> Zakin, E. (2011). The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup>See Righelato, P. (2008). Rita Dove and the Art of History. *Callaloo*, 31(3), 760–775. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27654903>