

Plight of a Black Woman: From Fictional Perspective

Tazrian Rashid

Student ID : 11203004

Department of English and Humanities

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By

Tazrian Rashid

Student ID : 11203004

Supervised by

Pritilata Sharma

Lecturer of BRAC University

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Abstract

The dissertation examines the struggle of a black woman under racism and sexism. Due to their race and also because of being a minority group, the African Americans had to undergo the humiliation of slavery in the 18th and 19th century in America. By examining the novels and short stories of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison I have explained the steps taken by black women to overcome the social restriction imposed on them. The time period of slavery, civil right movement is used in this dissertation. The data for this paper includes books, academic journals, and newspapers. The dissertation challenges the idea that black women are old-fashioned and not capable of gaining their independence from the white man or can't challenge patriarchy and fight for their own freedom. To prove this I have used the text of two famous American women writers Alice Walker and Toni Morrison who have received the Pulitzer awards in 1983 and 1988 for their respective novels; *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*.

Introduction

When we think of the term ‘Feminism’¹ we come across many philosophers, writers fighting for the right of women. Women in most part of societies are still neglected and dominated by their counterpart. While discussing the concept of feminism, the concept of hegemonic masculinity needs to be mentioned as well. In the struggle between power and domination in both public and private sphere of life hegemonic masculinity plays a pivotal role. Moreover, in a patriarchal setting male are also under certain pressure in order to protect their family or simply to put up with the expected masculine image in the family. Women are mostly envisioned as the weaker sex whose ultimate goal in life is to attract man, get into a matrimonial bond and bear children. They are often associated with terms like weak, soft, helpless, sweet, and innocent. The term “hegemonic masculinity” is very important in patriarchal society to dominate women. In order to dominate a woman a man must prove their excellence in certain criteria such as: heterosexuality, aggression, toughness, muscularity, courage, and finally prove their financial solvency. The power of hegemony becomes active only when this form is persuaded among the population in a natural form through media, family and other public institutions socially. The patriarchal household are mostly created for the males to function properly. Most successful male does not want working wives. They expect their wife to sit at home and look after their children. Even if the wife does sacrifice her career and education for her family does not get proper acknowledgment from her husband.

Though most men are beneficiary through the system of hegemonic masculinity but some men remain under the control of others. As Donaldson has mentioned in his article “What is Hegemonic masculinity”, “Patriarchal capitalism delivers the sense, before a man of whatever before even climbs out of bed in the morning that he is “better” than half of

¹For a good definition of the term, see Janet.

humankind'' (Donaldson 12)². Although the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity may be normative yet only few numbers of men belong to that category. It is a legitimize way of dominating woman as well as other man. Homosexual men are constantly dominated by heterosexual men under the practise of hegemony. The mistreatment of woman in patriarchal society is a common phenomenon. It has started from a very ancient time and still is in practice. However the amount of mistreatment reaches all limit of humanity when it includes other issues along with it. My topic is the mistreatment of black women from fictional perspective. The black woman has to undergo through tremendous hardship because of two reasons one is because they are woman and another is because they are black. The black women are not only oppressed by white man and woman but also by black man. In my paper I would analyse the work of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison two black African American writers, who have presented the struggle, the pain, the trauma, the injustice faced by African American woman in their respective novels and short stories *The Color Purple*, "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was easy", "Everyday Use" *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* and *Sula*. These four novels and two short stories clearly state the suffering of a black woman.

In primitive time the African people used to live in their own tribe and the societies were based on equality. The male was threatened by the birth power of woman and wanted to control them. In the chapter of mythical representation of woman Beauvoir points out the term 'eternal feminine' it means the discomforts which male faces regarding his birth. Since maternity has a paradox ascertain with it, a mother is perceive both as a life giver and also as a messenger of death. Maternity is worshipped and also loathed at the same time. This concept often gets projected in the woman as a form of discrimination. Woman's subordination has being taken place from a long period of time. If the French Revolution is

²In this paper, I follow the definition of *Hegemonic masculinity* as a figure of superiority. For further understanding, see Donaldson.

considered or the contemporary times are looked upon the subordination of the woman was common in the society.

With the advent of industrial system the requirement of manpower also emerged in Europe. So in order to fulfil the growing needs, the European started attacking African tribe with their weapon and started exploiting them. The African eventually became the slave of the white. The black women were treated worse than animal. They soon became the object to satisfy the sexual needs of the white man. The white people made them work harder and pay them less. The conditions of the black woman were margined among the margined. Their condition became worse when their own black man chose white woman over them. When “they wish to marry their own black man they looked down upon their own woman as ‘black bitch’” (Hajare, 10)³. Even after the abolition of Slavery in 1863 the white mistreated the black. The black were not able to achieve respect and autonomy from the white.

The struggle of white women was nothing in comparison to that of the black ones. Western Feminists fight against women discrimination, class discrimination but ignores the racial discrimination. But the black feminists fight for the right of all women. In my thesis I would use the work of two Afro-American writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker to analyse the struggle of black women through their novels and short stories. Morrison was the first Afro-American women writer to won Nobel Prize for her novel *Beloved* while Walker was the first Afro-American women writer to win Pulitzer award for her novel *The Color Purple*. With the help of these novels as well as other novels and short stories I would represent the racial and gender violence which black women were exposed to. I would further analyse the reaction of each character in certain situation which would broaden the understanding of humanity. The main purpose of choosing these writers is their success in the field of black feminism. The hardship of black women is much more critical and dense than women in general. Therefore

³To comprehend black men’s opinion on black women, see Hajare 1-70.

to understand the suffering of women, it is essential to become familiar with the life like fictional characters of Walker and Morrison. The emergence of two questions came in my mind while analysing these writers and the stories. They are:

- I) Does female solidarity have any role to play in the fight against patriarchy? If yes How?
- II) How independent did the black women become since the abolition of slavery and emergence of civil right movement?

For understanding patriarchy, it is important to understand the concept of male, social hierarchy and power. Without understanding masculinity, it is not possible to understand male domination. In spite of belonging to the same race, why does black women become subject to various injustice? Or how will they achieve freedom? My thesis will find the answers of these questions.

Alice Walker was a feminist, activist. Being a black woman herself she was accustomed to the plight of a black woman. In her novel *The Color purple* (1982) Walker's attempt was of bringing reality into fiction. By giving voice to the protagonist of the novel Walker brings out the harsh discrimination of humanity in the form of racial discrimination. In addition to racial discrimination the black woman had to undergo double discrimination because of gender issue. On top of these two injustices the protagonist of the novel was also poor. Hence the plight of Celia the protagonist of the novel was beyond human imagination. Walker shows how the protagonist comes out of this injustice and develops a sense of confidence towards her with the help of other female characters in the novel.

"Everyday Use" is a short story by Alice Walker where the issue of African American cultural heritage is highlighted. It also discusses how the view of one person is different from

the view of another person regarding this cultural heritage which ultimately drifts away them from each other.

“How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It was Easy” is a brilliant short story written by Alice Walker from her collection *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down (1981)* is the story of a black woman taking revenge on a white lawyer for abusing her.

Toni Morrison was another African American, who in spite of staying in a secured environment understood the plight of black woman. Her novel *The Bluest Eye(1970)* expresses the pain of a black woman and a self-hatred towards self because of her colour. The concept of ugliness was so vivid in her mind that she failed to love herself.

The most intense image of slavery is pictured in Toni Morrison's *Beloved (1987)*. Here a mother kills her own child so that the child does not have to undergo through slavery. This shows how hard it is for a black woman to become slave. The only way to save her daughter from such autocracy is by killing her.

Sula is another novel by Morrison, where the female characters are Eva, Helen, Hannah and Sula represents the matriarchy authoritative woman. The friendship of Sula and Nel is broken by their common love interest. Yet Nel at the end of the novel understands the importance of their bond.

The way Morrison described the abuse of white man over black woman with the help of fiction is utterly praiseworthy.

It was the year 1944 when Alice Walker came to this world on a place named Eatonton in Georgia. Her father Willie Lee Walker was a sharecropper and mother Minnie Tallulah Grant worked as a maid with mere seventeen dollars a week to send her daughter to college. Alice

Walker was the youngest among the eight children her parents. During her childhood days Walker was accidentally hurt by her brother through gun shot and partially became blind. From then onwards Walker became calm and preferred to involve herself in writing than playing outside. But the working environment which was needed for writing was not available in her house. Hence she used to complete her writing while sitting under trees. She grew up in an environment filled with racism and shortage of money these became a part of Walkers work along with gender issues.

After completing her high school she got admitted in Spelman College in Atlanta with a scholarship. While attending her college she became involve in Civil Rights Movement. This movement has started to ensure equality among all races. Then Walker received another scholarship and got admitted to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. From there she finished her graduation in 1965. While working in Head Start Program she encounters Melvyn Leventhal. He was a Civil Right Lawyer by profession. They got married in 1967 and blessed with one child named Rebeca. But the marriage did not continue much and they got divorced in 1976.

Alice Walker mainly deals with economic adversity, racism and African-American culture and as such her works involve these matters. In 1983 Walker won Pulitzer Prize for her ground breaking novel *The Color Purple*.

In Alice Walker's essay beauty she describes about her own incident before and after her accident which left a scar on her eye. During her early age she used to give more importance to beauty. Hence after her accident she felt she is ugly and remain self-conscious even during her adult age. Later on with the help of her daughter she realizes that people loved her not because of her beauty but because of her confidence. As soon as begin to accept her scar and gained back her confidence, she became beautiful again.

Toni Morrison was born 1931 as Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain (Ohio). She was the second of four children of George Wofford and Rammah Wills Wofford. They belong to a black working-class family. Her father was a welder and mother was a domestic worker with an ear for jazz. For avoiding the problems regarding racism her parents shifted to north from south. From her childhood Morrison keenly read books of Jane Austin to Tolstoy. She entered Howard University of Washington D.C in 1949 to study English Literature and left Lorain. Unlike other students in her college she was very focus in her studies. During that time she changed her name to Tori from Chloe because people there had trouble in pronouncing her name. The topic of her master's thesis was appearance of suicide based on the novels of William Folklore and Virginia Woolf Morrison heard much about folklore, music of African American culture from her childhood. Her parents were proud of their culture and never let any insecurity emerge to their children regarding facts like race .They were poor but it was never degrading for them. Wofford family was fond of sharing stories. Both the children and adults shared stories among themselves which later on inspired her on many of her writings. Morrison has admitted that many of her writings were taken from her real life. She studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities and it is Howard University where she joined a group that travelled frequently to south. She received the opportunity to view the life of Southern black community which was left in her childhood. She went to Howard in 1957 to serve an English faculty during that time she met her husband Harold Morrison a Jamaican architect. They were married within one year and had two children Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. However they were divorced when Morrison was pregnant with their second child in 1964.

After divorce she came to Syracuse and took the job of a textbook editor. While writing *The Bluest Eye* in 1968 she came to New York and started working as an editor for Random

House. Side by side she started giving lectures on African American literature. In 1970 Morrison published her first book *The Bluest Eye*. It was just the beginning of Morrison writing career. After that she wrote *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*. She left Random House on 1973 and gains the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. A member since 1981 of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among them the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and in 1983 she became the chairperson of New York University.

In Toni Morrison's essay "Unspeakable things Unspoken"⁴ referring to *The Literary Canon*, she explains what literary canon consists of and the place of Afro-American literature among American literature. She further claims Afro-American literature different from American Literature and calls it as sub-culture literature. Morrison first wanted to name this essay as "Cannon Fodder". According to her Afro-American literature does not have the chance of being canonized as long as critics keep preserving the literary interest of white men. She asserts four charges again Afro-American literature for not being canonized. Firstly, Afro-American Literature does not exist. Secondly, Afro-American art exist but is inferior. Thirdly, Afro-American Literature exists but has to meet up the criteria of western art to be considered superior. Finally Afro-American literature is raw like ore it must be refined with western culture. The backgrounds of the authors are discussed for the reader to better understand the authors and their work.

⁴For a good definition of *Literary Canon*, see Morrison.

Chapter One

Women Oppression Due to Racial Divergence

A common believe is prevalent in the patriarchal society about controlling women. The tactics of controlling women are by beating, abusing, molesting, and disrespecting them. If a man cannot dominate his wife or daughter is not considered manly many enough. It was a custom among the patriarchal society to have authority over his women. The African Americans were no different. After the abolition of slavery, its influence has not tarnished. Following the footsteps of their master African-American male impose their power on Afro-American women. In the novels of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* the theme of gender violation, rape, incest is clearly evident. The male characters in the novel vent their frustration, anger, despair on the women's body by using physical violence on them. The Black women had to undergo through these tortures in almost every in their life and it has no end to it unless someone escapes from it or use any other means to resist it.

Alice Walker first introduced the term womanist to describe the black women. In 1984 when she went for an interview with David Bradley for New York Times, there she has stated that she sensed a distinction between African-American women and black women. It has been mentioned by her, "The problem with white feminism is that it is not the tradition that teaches white women that they are capable" (Bradley, 8 January 1984)⁵. But black women are accountable to their actions because of their colour. There arises some difference between the black and white women. In this theory both the racism and sexism is high lightened which lacks in the general theory of feminism. This theory further discusses that black women suffers from more intense oppression than that of the white ones. There are some criteria of a

⁵ See Bradley to get a glimpse at the problem with white feminism.

womanist, a womanist who loves both men and women sexually and non-sexually. It is a celebration of womanhood. A womanist is someone “who is committed to survival and committed to the entire people male and female” (Walker, 1979). Finally she concludes the theory by saying “womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender” (Walker, 1979).

Womanist does not only seek equality for black women but everyone in general.

The novel *The Color Purple* starts with the protagonists suffering. Celie’s letter says, “He [Pa] never had a kind word to say to me. Just say Yougonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

But I don’t never get used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook.”⁶(Walker,1-2)

This is the story of a fourteen year old girl named Celie who is raped by her father. Her father forbids her to tell anyone about the rape. From the beginning of her childhood a sense of fear was planted in her mind regarding the male power. As Berlant mentions in her article, “Race, Gender, and Nation in “*The Color Purple*””, “Celie thinks she knows, in which father’s control of the family’s “private” resources effectively gives him licence to violate his “women”, is a story that reveals not a family’s private or internal structure but its social and historical placement”(Berlant,10)⁷. This story does not only gives the reader the idea of an individual family but it constantly brings the racial discrimination in the form of characters. In the final chapter of the story we see that Celie’s biological father was lynched by the white for having success in business .When she discovers the truth about her father there comes a total transformation in the character of Celie. The sexual struggle switches into racial

⁶See Walker, for an insight to the protagonist’s suffering in novel *The Color Purple*.

⁷On a family’s social and historical placement of masculine hegemony, see Berlant.

struggle. The way Celie shares her pain and suffering with God by writing letters after her rape, her biological father did not even get this chance. As the story progresses the character of another male character enters into the novel Albert, Celie's husband. But Celie addresses him as Mr _____ and he married Celie for taking care of his children and satisfying his sexual desires. The act of Albert's love to Celie feels like a chore. Sometimes she pretends not to be present in the room while he is making love to her. There is no love and mutual understanding between the couple.

Another story of domestic violence is evident in the novel between Albert's son Harpo and daughter-in-law Sophia. After marriage when Harpo fails to control Sophia. He goes to Albert and Celie for advice. Both of them advised to beat his wife in order to control her. As far as Mr is concerned it is nothing surprising because when "Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. _____ say, Cause he my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa" (Walker,23)⁸. In Albert's view it is a duty of a man to beat his wife and he also considers Celie indiscipline so in order to make her obedient and discipline to him he hits her. In this process of domestic violence Celie began to feel bad about herself loses respect and love for herself. Therefore she loses the self-confidence which is essential for every human being. The life with Albert is even worse than the life with her father. Her marriage does not give her the privilege to escape the hardship she has endured at her father's place. Sophia however knows how to fight to change her position in a patriarchy setting. So she becomes upset when she learns about Celie's advice and confronts her. "She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own

⁸*ibid*, 23

house”(Walker, 42)⁹. Then Celie admits her mistake and explains that she is jealous of Celie assertiveness.

Celie hates the fact that Sophia is able to stand up for herself and live life according to her own terms. The boldness that Sophia has and which Celie lacks upsets her.

Another female character present in the novel is a total contrast to Celie. Her name is Shrug and she is Albert’s mistress. She is a singer; she is independent, confident and has the ability to negotiate her life on her own term. At first meeting she called Celie ugly and they were not in good terms. Later they become good friends and Celie is able to achieve her independence. Walker’s points out the female solidarity among the characters to fight the male chauvinistic. Likewise Mary Agnes Harpo’s girlfriend also hated Sophia but tries to get her out of jail when Sophia is imprisoned and Sophia also looks after the children of Mary Agnes while she goes for pursuing her singing career. Another rape occurs in the novel when Mary Agnes goes to the jail to release Sophia her uncle the warden of the jail rapes her. This is a good example of a white man raping a black woman without any fear of getting punished.

Celie suffers from lack of confidence and lost respect for herself. The first traumatic experience of Celie’s childhood leaves a deep scar on her mind more than the scar on her body. Eventually this wound turns Celie into subservient, silent invisible women. The male punishes the women for the illicit affair by cutting off their mouth. In the article of Cheung, ““Don't Tell”: Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*”, “the tongue of the victimized women is cut off” (Cheung,3)¹⁰. Here the male oppressor use the weapon of coercion to shut the mouth of the female victim to hide his crime. Celie’s step-father silenced her from the very beginning of this sexual assault. So does Albert, when Nettie refused his lustful advance towards him. Celie say’s Nettie advise her to fight, “You got to fight. You got

⁹*ibid*, 42

¹⁰To grasp the exact nature of the victimization of women, see Cheung.

to fight. But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive"(Walker,17)¹¹. Here, when Nettie arrives at her place, Celie does not know how to fight for her rights. Albert's children take advantage of her weakness and bully her. So Nettie is teaching Celie to stand up for herself. But Celie explains her that it is not in her nature to fight. All she knows is to endure everything and be alive.

By the end of the novel Celie gains her voice and confidence with the help of other female characters and discovers her inner self. Sophia, Shrug and Nettie encourages Celie to raise her voice and take a stand for herself. They further incorporate the idea that Celie is not destined to serve black men who does not treat her well. Sophia never tolerates Harpo's misbehaviour towards her and leaves him when he does not treat her right. This teaches Celie to stand against Albert when he hides her letters for twenty years. While Celie lashes out at Albert Sophia encourages her. However Sophia lost her assertiveness at the hands of the white. They send her jail for refusing to work as Mayor's maid and pushing the Mayor. But nothing happens to the Mayor for slapping her. As Sophia says to Celie "Everytime they ast me to do something, Miss, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say". (Walker,93)¹². The domination of the white towards the black makes Sophia loss herself and surrenders her ego in serving the white.

Shrug helps Celie in finding her sister's letter which act as a turning point in Celie's life. By the help of her sister Nettie's letter Celie discovers the truth about her identity. She discovers Alfonso her stepfather the one who raped her during her childhood is not her real father. This fact helps Celie to come out of her childhood trauma and gain confidence to stand up against mister and attain her liberty.

¹¹See walker, 17.

¹²*ibid*, 93.

The novelist encourages the bond of sisterhood and women friendship and solidarity to escape from the male domination. By the help of this power a woman can receive real freedom from the patriarchal society against all the domestic violence.

The Bluest Eye is a story of Pecola Breedlock and her desire to become beautiful by having blue eyes. As states by an omniscient narrator in the novel, “ It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights-if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different”(Morrison,164-165)¹³.

She believes all her troubles would end if she obtains a blue eye. The ill-treatment of her teachers, classmate, shopkeeper and mother would change towards her. As has been mentioned in the novel Once Pecola goes to Geralind’s house and her cat dies in the hand of her son Junior but when Geralind comes and think Pecola killed the cat .So call her “nasty black bitch” (Morrison,324)¹⁴ and Pecola feels insulted and develops a self-hatred about her image. She started to look herself from the white people’s perspective or the perspective of those who considers her ugly. In other words she wanted blue eyes to see the world from a different perspective and also see the image of her beauty in other people’s eye. This is a common scenario among Afro-American culture “because being dark meant never been considered beautiful, being other became canonical part of black women’s literature” (Rosenberg, 6)¹⁵. It is within the Afro-American culture, the history of slavery was based on skin color. The white American controlled the blacks on the basis of this skin color . So this complex regarding skin color is a part of Afro-American culture which is impossible to remove from their mind. From her childhood Pecola is not loved or cared by her parent Pauline Breedlove and Cholly Breedlove. The fight of her parents on regular basis creates a

¹³See Morrison, for an understanding of the protagonist’s perception of her own image.

¹⁴*ibid*, 324.

¹⁵For an understanding of the standard of beauty among black women, see Rosenberg.

negative impact in Pecola's mind. Her brother Sammy either leaves the house to avoid these fights or takes part in the fight.

Her mother also mistreats her and behaves badly with her. She is the bread earner of the house and due to her own pain she behaves badly with Pecola. It has to be mentioned that she spits honey to the white child where she works but towards her own daughter, she always remain harsh and rude. In the article Kuenz, "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity", she mentions "*The Bluest Eye* indicates by both race and class – results in bodies that are always the site of multiple discourses circling around and ultimately comprising what we call "femininity" (Kuenz,4)¹⁶. Morrison points out the racial politics by giving voice to one of the narrator Claudia ,who expressed her confusion in her lacking to achieve honey spit words .The attention Maureen received by being a white Claudia her sister and Pecola never received that kind of attention from anyone. Her mother Pauline Breedlove had leg injury which alienated her from her family members and after marrying Cholly her life was ruined. Pauline's husband did not have the sense of responsibility towards his wife or children. He did not even hesitate to burn his house while his wife was inside. Pauline's behaviour towards her reflects her troublesome marriage. She was not happy with Cholly. When she first met Cholly "She was secure and grateful; he was kind and lively"(Morrison,390)¹⁷. But Cholly was free creature and fails to maintain the family responsibilities.Hence Pauline tries to find happiness in romantic movies and fascinates her life based on it. "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen"(Morrison,416)¹⁸. She has adopted the white beauty and perceive people's value on that bases .For this reason she does not treat Pecola

¹⁶ See Kuenz, for a good definition of the term *Femininity*.

¹⁷See Morrison, for a clear understanding of the perception of white people.

¹⁸*ibid*, 416.

properly. She even considers herself ugly. Pecola's obsession for blue eyes was influenced by her mother's love for white beauty and white people.

Pecola was raped by her father twice. She even becomes pregnant. Her entrance into a sexual world without her consent leaves a traumatic scar on her mind which eventually turns her mad. On the other hand Frieda's father is the opposite of Pecola's father. He supported her when she was molested by Henry. A rape victim needs a lot of moral support from the family to recover the trauma. But Pecola was so unfortunate to receive any family support from her parents. When she told her mother about the incident she beat her severely. As far as Pecola's father is concerned he is a disgrace in the name of father. Instead of protecting his daughter he became the perpetrator of rape. The childhood of Cholly Breedlove has a lot to do with the sexual violence he has caused his daughter. Cholly does not have any obligation towards his life either from job or family. As the narrator mentions him as "Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep" (Morrison, 554)¹⁹. Cholly's past has an important role to play in raping Pecola. He was abandoned by his mother and father was busy in unimportant activities. So he was raised by Aunt Jammy, she also died in a short period of time. In the absence of parental guidance Cholly turned into an indifferent, carefree person. There is another humiliation in Cholly's past. While he was having his first sexual experience with Darlene they were witnessed by some white racist. They made fun of their sexual intercourse by saying, "Come on, coon. Faster. You ain't doing nothing for her" (Morrison, 510)²⁰. Their tone was humiliating to Cholly and he felt insulted. This is one of the dark spots in Cholly's life which is vented on Pecola by raping her.

¹⁹*ibid*, 554.

²⁰*ibid*, 510.

The protagonist in the novel becomes the victim of everyone's frustration. She pays the price of her innocence. No one in the novel seems to love her truly not even her own parents. In the final part of the novel Claudia describe Pecola's madness as "the birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us" (Morrison, 699-700)²¹. The public have vented all their frustration, baggage on the shoulder of this little girl Pecola. The reason could be because she was an easy target, who endures everything in silence. The community calls her ugly and gets a superior sense of beauty among them. Hence Pecola is beautiful according to Claudia because she makes everyone around her feel beautiful because of her ugliness.

In the first novel *The Color Purple*, Celie achieves her independence at the end of the novel. On the other hand in the next novel *The Bluest Eye* the protagonist Pecola suffers through similar situation is not able to achieve any change in her life. The importance of female solidarity and sisterhood bonding plays an important role here. Hence if Pecola's mother supported her, her life would have taken a different turn.

²¹*ibid*, 699-700.

Chapter Two

Gender Hierarchy in the context of Slavery

The history of African-America slavery has been presented in an unflinchingly manner by Morrison in her famous novel *Beloved*. The struggle of a slave is depicted in visual manner through the point of view of the protagonist Seth, Paul D, Baby Sugg, who is an ex-slave of sweet home. The author did not let the reader forget the harsh truth about Slavery, which includes the master- slave relationship, mother - daughter detachment and identity crisis of slavery throughout the novel. Even after getting freedom from slavery the slave could not lead a normal life. It will not be incorrect to say the loss of a slave during slavery could never be gained even after the abolition of slavery.

Seth represents the visual picture of such a slave who did not only lost her dignity and pride as an individual but also lost a part of her maternity which she is never able to obtain. Yet the bond of mother is extremely strong among these characters which make them extra-ordinary among the commoners. In spite of School teacher's torture, his nephew's stealing the breast milk of Seth, she is able to give birth to her child and protect her from the ill-treatment of the white masters. Another motherly bond is noticed among Halle and his mother Baby Sugg. He brought his mother's freedom by working extra hours as a slave. This proves the intense bond share among the mother and a child.

Slavery is such an institution where the difference between master and slave is huge. Even good people like Mr and Mrs. Garner treated slaves as an inferior being. Slaves are constantly bought and sold from one place to another. In such a system if one gets attached to their family then they would have to face the harsh consequence. As mentioned by Paul D in the novel ; "Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything

that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love”(part 1chapter4)²². Paul D is cautioning Sethe about her origin, about the harsh truth of slavery which was forgotten by her in the light of motherhood. The fact that Sethe does not even have proper memory of her own mother explains the detachment of slave from their family. In the novel when beloved asked Sethe about her mother, she replied “My woman? You mean my mother? ... I didn’t see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. ...She didn’t even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember”(part1,chapter6)²³.By the description of Sethe’s mother the hardship of slavery is evident. The description is quite unusual and vague in comparison to the usual mother-daughter relationship. But in the slave community it was very common for a slave to distance herself/himself from their family

Seth was brought up by Nan who mentions Sethe about the mother when she says, “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man... Telling you. I am telling you, small girl

Sethe”(Part1,Chapter6)²⁴.Like Sethe mother she also killed her own children though the two incidents have different reasons behind it. Her mother killed her children because they were the results of the rape done white masters while Sethe killed her children to protect them from the white master.It was mentioned in the article of Demetrakopoulos, “Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's Beloved”where she rectify Sethe’s murder of her children by saying, “for Sethe the children are better off dead, their fantasy future protected from the heinous reality of slavery”(Demetrakopoulos,4)²⁵. Radical feminism support women to have control over their sexuality and reproduction. According to

²²See Morrision, Chapter 4 for the harsh consequence of developing attachment in a slave family.

²³*ibid.*

²⁴*ibid*

²⁵For rectification of Sethe;s murder of her children, see Demetrakopoulos.

this theory “Sethe” achieved power by taking the live of her own child. A mother has the right to give birth to her children as well take the lives of her children. Sethe being the mother of her children killed her children to protect them from slavery which she was victimized into.

The identity crisis which a slave goes through is not removed from his/her memory. The worst trait of slavery is it does not leave the memory of the slave. The memory of slavery haunts Sethe in different ways whether it through her neighbours, her ex master who came to take her and children back to sweet home. Slaves like Jackson Till, Aunt Phillis and Halle went insane. Thus they lost connection among themselves and the world. Baby Sugg and Paul D went to great depression. Paul D was also haunted by the memory of torture done by slavery when iron bit where put in his mouth. He recovered from his depression by the technique of detaching himself from his loved ones. Paul D was treated worse than animal by the white masters .The memory of slave treatment does not leave himas “Paul D. who relives the savage treatment that he endured while shackled to ten other slaves and transported to a brutal prison for the crime of threatening to kill Brandywine, the man who bought him from schoolmaster after the attempted escape from Sweet Home”(Rashid,11)²⁶.The way School teachers treated this slave is beyond human imagination.

Throughout the novel two themes are highly noticeable; one is motherhood and another is slavery. Yet there seems to be a conflict between the two. The fact that Sethe has an unclear memory of her mother indicates that slavery does not support motherhood. Belonging in such a system, Sethe brought freedom for herself and her children at the cost of sacrificing her motherhood. The appearance of Beloved in the novel familiarizes Sethe with her past. Her traumatizing past makes her get rid of her sins and her past pains of slavery which she has repressed in her heart for years.

²⁶For a placid view of the dehumanizing effect of slavery, see Rashid.

Alice Walker's *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* comprises of many short stories compiled together in one book. From this collection "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy" is short story of revenge and reversal of power. This story involves victories where black gets over white, women taking power over men and poor dominating rich by taking revenge on them for mistreating them for years.

The story involves a black poor teenager being subjected to sexual harassment by her mother's white employer. It represents the hegemonic domination of a white adult to a black child by dint of money. The white man sexually and emotionally exploits the black child by offering her gifts and money.

Firstly he uses her body for satisfying his sexual needs. As it was mentioned in the story, from the girl's point of view "he told me he loved me. I didn't love him, but he had begun to look a little better to me. Really, I think, because he was so clean. He bathed a lot and never smelled even alive, to tell the truth. Or maybe it was the money he gave me, or the presents he bought" (Walker, 1)²⁷. The white man did not force the black girl physically rather dominated her by taking her permission in an indirect way. In Gramsci's view "hegemony of power"²⁸ is where he talks about taking consent instead of forcing anybody for doing anything. It is another strategy of imposing power over the powerless. This is exactly what Budda has done to the black teenager. He did not force her directly towards him but has used his power of manipulation to convince her to sleep with him on a regular basis in return of the money he offers her.

Secondly he made her sign legal papers to send her sane mother to mental asylum. When the mother finds out about the illegitimate affair between Budda and her sixteen years old

²⁷For a clear understanding of the black teenager's perception of love, see Walker 1.

²⁸See Gramsci to apprehend the theory of cultural hegemony to further the establishment of a working-class worldview.

daughter she asked “me didn't I know he was a white man? Didn't I know he was a married man with two children? Didn't I have good sense? And do you know what I told her? I told her he loved me. Mama was crying and praying at the same time by then”(Walker,2)²⁹.The mother was well aware about the racial difference between the white masters and black slaves. She also knew well that a white man can never love black women under any circumstances. For the white men the blacks “ain't even human”(Walker,2)³⁰.

However the real twist of the story begins when the black girl realizes every injustice done to them and decides to take a revenge by killing Budda. She kills him and takes all his money. This is an example of how powerless rise against the powerful after being oppressed for a period of long time.

²⁹For the abysmal difference between white and black people, see Walker.

³⁰*ibid*, 2.

Chapter Three

Attaining Assertiveness in the form of Rebel

Toni Morrison familiarizes the reader with female friendship and how women faces challenges of the patriarchy and attain freedom by rejecting the gender roles prescribed by the society. This chapter deals with the plot and characters of the novel accustomed to such freedom and women who embraces the conventional gender roles in the form of examples. The novel discusses two different kind of women in the form of two characters Sula and Nel in her novel *Sula*. In this novel racism is evident along with female friendship and betrayal. The setting of the novel starts with Bottom in Medallion, Ohio. This used to be a lively place for the black community. Once the white discovered it as a fertile land, they took it away from the black slaves and gave them the hilly land instead. The presence of racism is noticed among those who suffer from racism. As “Nel was the color of wet sandpaper – just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same” (Morrison, 1922.9)³¹. She had to bear the discrimination while travelling in a bus with her mother in order to visit her Helene’s grandmother.

Jude had to undergo through the injustice of racism. When he was not able to achieve his desire job because of his race he becomes frustrated and realize it was foolish of him to trust any Caucasian man. It has been mentioned in the novel “Hey Jude. What you know good? White man running it – nothing good” (Morrison, 1937.171-8.172). Jude began to realize that white men will never do justice to him. Jude being a black man could not get his desired job under a white recruiter because the position of that specific job is only fixed for the white people. This discrimination creates despise for white people in the heart of a black man.

³¹ See Morrison, for an insightful view of the subtle racial discrimination.

Therefore being frustrated in his work life he decided to have a good family life instead. So he got married to Nel and started his life afresh. However the marriage did not work well due to Jude's betrayal Nel for her best friend Sula.

The novel is based on the friendship of Sula and Nel. It has a significant impact with the novel's plot till the end. As Nel realizes the place of Sula is irreplaceable in her life more than her marriage or family. Even though the two girls are opposite from each other yet they share a strong bond between them which could not be destroyed by any man. From a very early age Sula and Nel began to realize the harsh truth regarding racism and feminism "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they set about creating something else to be"(Morrison,1922.8). They would be black women. So each wanted to embrace freedom in his/her own terms. Nel wanted to become a wife and mother, sustaining the values of the community. For Sula, it means living an independent life, pursue education. Nel chooses to get married and have children while Sula chooses to remain single and avoid all conventional female roles such as wife, mother.

Morrison "introduces Nel Sula's girlhood friend into the novel before she does Sula—and the presentation of Nel is woven into four generations of women. Nel's mother Helene Wright, has been raised by her grand-mother (Nel's great grandmother), who took her as an infant from her Creole mother (Nel's grandmother) an independent women who has been living her life like a madam. Helene in reaction against her mother is strenuously conventional, married and proper. Nel raised and tamed by these standards, finds in her friendship with Sula an expression of the otherwise muted parts of her personality, parts of herself that, by

implication, derive from maternal ancestor: her grandmother Creole madam, who like Sula, is sensuous and independent”(Sokoloff,430-431)³².

Nel is presented in the novel as a good girl, polite and obedient. She easily follows the conventional roles the society offers a woman. The upbringing of Nel has never taught her to question the authority. Her mother Helene was a daughter of a prostitute and she tries her best to remove that part from her identity. For this reason she behaves in an extreme polite manner and taught Nel to become one. Nel never had the chance to become a kid or to break rules. She was very quiet, very neat and disciplined from her childhood.

On the other hand Sula was brought up in a home matriarch where her grandmother Eva is the head of the family. In the article, “Intimations of Matriarchal Age: Notes on the Mythical Eva in Toni Morrison's Sula” Sokoloff has explained “ how the grandmother Eva (a name that mythically implies the ancestral mother of us all) in shaping force in the formation of the protagonist’s—Sula’s – character”(Sokoloff,430). The Eva plays a significant role in the construction of Sula’s character. After getting abandoned by her husband Eva abolishes her own leg to earn money and run the family. She is the epitome of powerful women who controls the life of others. So being a mother when she has seen her son Plum becomes a drug addict (due to post war depression), she does not hesitate to kill him. Sokoloff further in her essay suggests “Just as she is prepared to do violence to herself for the protection of her children, she is ready to do violence to children themselves when she feels powerless to protect them”(Sokoloff,432). The violence she has created actually made her more powerful and bold. Sula also like her grandmother takes the help of violence in order to hold power. She cut her finger tip to stop the boys from teasing Nel. The difference between Sula and Eva is “What Eva enacts in the interest of preserving her children poverty, Sula transform into a

³²See Sokoloff for further understanding of the frustration behind a mother’s violent behaviour towards her children.

move that seeks not merely to survive, but to challenge threatening forces”

(Sokoloff,432).Eva has been a prey of circumstance and became what she became whereas Sula was disobedient from her birth. She wanted to become free and attained ultimate freedom by rejecting the conventional women roles. It was also mentioned in the essay of Sokoloff, “Eva has spent a lifetime investing in endurance, Sula redirects into defiance. When Eva tells her she needs a man and children, she replies she wants only to create herself”(Sokoloff,433). Sula chooses to remain unmarried and attain college makes her powerful from other women in the society. From the beginning to the end of the novel Sula lived her life in her own terms.

Even after not having a leg Eva is flirtatious with men. Sula has seen her mother and grandmother with multiple men from her childhood. She has grown up in a free house. So when she grows up she also sleeps with multiple men. This has caused her lose her best friend Nel for a long period of time because of sleeping with her husband Jude. Though Jude was partially involve in this affair as Sula but everyone in the community including Nel blames only Sula for the affair and breaking the marriage of her best friend.

Sula leaves the place because of town people’s gossip and scornful behaviour. Then she started having a causal relationship with Ajax. During the affair Sula becomes serious about Ajax and he understood it and left her. After Ajax left she found his licence and discovers his name to be A. Jack not Ajax. This information breaks Sula down .She returns to town after ten years but was not in touch with Nel until her death. During the time of Sula’s death Nel comes and visit her and ask her why she had an affair with her husband. But Sula being an unmarried girl fails to understand Nel’s pain and gets upset at Nel for not forgiving her. Only it was after Sula’s death Nel realizes that she missed Sula not Jude during all these years.

In "Everyday Use" of Alice Walker is about the struggle of African Americans to obtain their individual identity in cultural terms. The conflicts of the story arise regarding the heritage of their family and each character has its own point of view in analysing the situation. It was written during the time of late 1960s to early 1970s, when African American were trying to re-define their culture. Along with them many scholars and intellectuals were also interested to know how they have endured slavery.

This is a story of a mother with two daughters; Maggie and Dee. Both of them are total opposite to one another. If Maggie represents quiet and ignorant dark skinned black African American then Dee represents educated, well-spoken light skinned White Colonizer. The mother is the narrator of the story and the whole story is centred on a "quilt". This "quilt" is the heritage of their family made by women of two generation and it contain scuffle from their Grandpa Ezra's Civil War uniform. The question is who the quilt should belong to Maggie or Dee. While describing Maggie their mother has said, as "Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? This is the way my Maggie walks. . . She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passes her by"(Walker,4).The mother criticizes Maggie's disfigurement .Maggie's crumpled sprit upsets mama. She has to protect Maggie and care her more than Dee because of Maggie's disfigurement. Sometimes she imagines to married off Maggie and enjoy freedom.

Dee on the other hand Dee joins a civil organization to fight for African American rights of equality. She changes her name from Dee to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. While describing Dee her mother mentions "She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know"(Walker ,5).When Dee was small she used to return from boarding

school with lots of knowledge and boss over at mama and Maggie. Instead of being proud of her daughter's accomplishments the mother seems to be terrified by her knowledge. For the mother Dee's knowledge would break their simplicity and safety similar to the fire that has caught in their old house. Due to Dee's education she started demeaning her family.

Alienation is created between Dee and her family. On one side lie Mama and Maggie while Dee is alone at the other side. The reason behind Mama's insecurity regarding Dee's education could be due to her own late schooling. Mama also fears that education would give them the illusion of belonging in a certain world they actually do not belong to.

Although in the end of the story, the quilt is given to Maggie and not Dee. The reason behind it is, Dee has changed her name; she does not know how to quilt and is least interested about the origin of this quilt. All she wants is to hang it on a wall for display. The past heritage does not matter to Dee. She wants to move far away from the past leaving the past of her ancestors.

On the other hand Maggie will continue the heritage of her family by using the quilt and continue the legacy of her family. Dee leaves with a heavy heart at the end of the novel and Mama and Maggie are happy with each other as it has been mentioned in the end. "And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed" (Walker, 18). Mama does not miss Dee or expects anything from her not even her gratitude and Maggie isn't nervous anymore.

Conclusion

The work of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison is significant for understanding the African culture. As Toni Morrison very vividly portrays the picture of slavery, civil war and imperialism existed in African culture. In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola was struggling hard to have blue eye to look like Soaphead. In order to be free from inter and intra racism prevalent in her society. She was never loved by her mother and was subjected to rape by her father. To avoid all these hardships she thought that she should have blue eyes. Only blue eye will protect her from the hardship in her life. The spread of racism is so huge that it does not leave the mind of a young black girl. However all her dreams shatters at the end of the novel and she loses her mind in this process. Alice Walker 's short story "Everyday Use" is similar to this in the sense when Dee (Wangero) tries to become what she is not with the help of education ,she loses her family and become alienated from them. Though she changes her name and works for equality of the African Americans yet loses in touch with her own heritage. This is the common dilemma of the black whether to continue the heritage of their ancestor and remain backward, oppressed or leave everything become in the field of development and lose their cultural heritage forever.

In her short story "How Did I get Away with Killing of the Biggest Lawyers in the State?It was Easy", the story shows how the oppressed black finally resist the oppression done to them for years and years. The girl in the story represents the black slave and the sexual oppression she suffers from four years is symbolical to the slavery. By killing the lawyer the girl has not only protected herself but resisted slavery done to the blacks especially black woman by the rich white men.

Toni Morrison has elaborated the picture of slavery in her work *Beloved*. Her research on slavery from the beginning to the post slavery was pictured in the novel. The scar on Sethe

'sbody ,the iron torture on Paul D's memory does not leave the mind of the slaves mind even after the end of slavery. Beloved's craving for sugar represents the sugar plantation where the slaves had to work day and night. In *Sula* the role of a conventional woman versus an unconventional woman is shown in the form of Nel and Sula. The women attain freedom by rejecting the patriarchal society and living life on their own term. In the novel *Sula* she is an ideal example of such a woman. The matriarchal family of Eva is also an example of independent woman.

In Alice Walker has written many short stories and novel however her main concern of writing seems to evolve around the margined and neglected people of African American. The most neglected among all the social groups are the women of Africa and her novel *The Color Purple* is based on a black woman who is victimized to domestic violence. The position of a 20th century African American women in her family is establish by Walker in the form of the protagonist of the novel Celie. It is only with the help of her friend Shugg and sister Nettie she achieves independence. In the book it was seen that Sofia and Shugg Avery were more assertive and dominating than the other male characters present in their life. According to Walker's theory of "womanist"³³ self-spirit of activism, bonding with other female is an important element of womanist. It also demands equality by following a change in perspective. This theory is applicable in this novel.

The main aim of this dissertation is to know the role of female solidarity to attain assertiveness in a patriarchal society and how independent are the black women after the abolition of slavery and emergence of civil war. Both of these questions have been answered in the paper with the help of the novels and short stories of Walker and Morrison. The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter discusses some theories related to the topic and the background of the two writers Alice Walker and Toni Morrison is given in order to better

³³See Walker for an insightful definition of *womanist*.

understand their novels and short stories. In the beginning of this paper I have raised two questions and the purpose of this paper is to find the answer of these questions through my thesis. Though it was very difficult to find the answers of this question yet I think I managed to find the answer of the first question clearly. Yes female solidarity has a huge role to fight against patriarchy. In my paper it has been shown that with the help of the characters and plot of the novel how the victims of domestic violence, sexual violence and cultural violence were able to come out of their obstacles by the help of other female characters. It was also shown the case of woman who has suffered its evil consequence without the help of any other female support. The last question has not been properly answered in my thesis but I tried to give some answers relating to the question.

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