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Marginalization and Oppression of African American Women

G. M. Madhavi

Research Scholar, Rayalaseema University, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT

*African Americans have had to face many obstacles to get their standing today. First, their forefathers were brought to American colonies as slaves in 17th and 18th centuries. Then, they continued slavery for generations being treated like animals, discriminated, oppressed and marginalized. The present paper makes an attempt to study the marginalized life of colored women in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Being colored women, both Walker and Morrison have the advantage of portraying what it is to be a woman of color in the society. It is obvious that their slave ancestors and the years of struggle for woman rights give them the opportunity to create life-like characters in their novels. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is based on a black community. She was the first major writer to make a full-fledged attack on patriarchal domination within the black community itself. Celie, a fourteen-year-old protagonist is a slave in her own home and in her own community. She is almost completely voiceless but her letters enable her to break the silence secretly that is normally imposed on her. It is a story about personal transformation and empowerment of oppressors especially black women. By reading the novel one can understand that by fighting against adversity, one can examine identity, discover selfhood and become free from the bondage of oppressive. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* offers a painfully compelling, detailed account of slave humiliation and oppression. It tells the story of a mother, Sethe who is a black slave female formerly suffers from slavery, racism, violence, and rape. The novel describes the incessant burning, emotional conflict in the consciousness of Sethe. The horrors of slavery lead Sethe to commit an act of violence against her child. Though Sethe justifies the murder as her way of sending her children to a better existence this justification does no good to Sethe psychologically. Thus, she restores her human dignity as well as her child's and denies the right of the whites to possess her family as slaves. The novels *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* are set in post-slavery. They are saturated with violence and other forms of oppressive behavior towards women. The women in the novels bear gender, class and racial discrimination which are often expressed through violence and sexual abuse.*

Keywords: African Americans, racial discrimination, gender and color, slave humiliation and oppression

1. INTRODUCTION

African Americans have had to face many obstacles to get their standing today. First, their forefathers were brought to American colonies as slaves in 17th and 18th centuries. Then, they continued slavery for generations being treated like animals, discriminated, oppressed and marginalized. During the period of Reconstruction from 1865 to 1877, Congress passed and enforced laws that promoted civil and political rights for African Americans across the South. Most notable among the laws passed were the three Amendments to the US Constitution: the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) guaranteed African Americans the rights of American citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) guaranteed Africans the constitutional right to vote. Even after the Reconstruction period, colored people especially colored women still had to deal with racial discrimination, demoralization, subjugation, and hatred. African American women have had to face unbelievable odds at obtaining self-assurance and identity. They suffered a double burden under slavery because of their gender and color.

The present paper makes an attempt to study the marginalized life of colored women in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Being colored women, both Walker and Morrison have the advantage of portraying what it is to be a woman of color in the society. It is obvious that their slave ancestors and the years of struggle for woman rights give them the opportunity to create life-like characters in their novels. Bell says that Both Walker and Morrison "...deepen our understanding of the limitations and possibilities of lives of black Americans..." (269). The protagonists of the novels suffer from Slavery, violence, and rape.

2. DESCRIPTION

2.1 Slavery

Alice Malsenior Walker's novel *The Color Purple* published in 1982 is based on a black community. She was the first writer to make a full-fledged attack on patriarchal domination within the black community itself. Celie, a fourteen-year-old protagonist, and the narrator is a slave in her own home and in her own community.

Celie lives with her younger sister Nettie, half-brothers and sisters. She lives a life of abuse. Her mother has become sick because of numerous pregnancies. Alphonso is the man whom she believes to be her father. Later on, she realizes that Alphonso is her stepfather. She is made to suffer by the man who she had believed for years to be her father. Celie's world was of fear, despair, insecurity and loneliness, unspoken and unspeakable suffering, colorless dark and with no ray of hope or sunshine. Celie is almost completely voiceless but her letters enable her to break the ice secretly that is normally imposed on her.

When Mr. Albert comes for Nettie, Celie's sister, Alphonso offers Celie to him who desperately needs a woman to look after his two children and the household. When Celie's father introduces Mr. Albert to Celie, he is on his horse; this suggests that he is higher and more important than her. Alphonso orders Celie to turn around so that Mr. Albert can get a better look at her. Celie becomes a sexual servant to Mr. Albert and a stepmother to his children. Celie's life continues to be miserable. She is beaten, abused, exploited, and humiliated by her husband. When Mr. Albert's oldest son Harpo asks him why he beats Celie, he simply says that she is his wife. It reveals the readers the attitude of men towards women.

When Mr. Albert's sister Kate, asks Harpo (Mr. Albert's eldest son) to help Celie, he answers, that women have to work. It reflects the power of oppression of men. Harpo thinks that it is the duty of women to work and not of men.

Celie bears the ruthless behavior of her husband because she is unaware of any other form of behavior and she does not have any other purpose in her life. She has lost the sense of her individuality. She is portrayed as a victim of oppression in the novel and she is not treated as human and her husband does not even look at to her face.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* published in 1987 offers a painfully compelling, detailed account of slave humiliation and oppression. It tells the story of a mother, Sethe who suffers from slavery, racism, violence, and rape. The novel describes the incessant burning, emotional conflict in the consciousness of Sethe. Sethe, an ex-slave lives at "124" Bluestone Road, Cincinnati with her fourth and the youngest child Denver. Denver is a young girl of eighteen years.

After her escape from slavery, Sethe spends twenty-eight wonderful days in Cincinnati. On the last day, however, her master, school teacher comes for Sethe to take her and children back to Sweet Home. Sethe's children consist of two boys and her daughter, the "crawling already? Baby" (99). When she recognized school teacher's hat outside the house, she felt hummingbird wings beating around her head and could think only, "No. No. Nono. Nonono" (163). The hat is a symbolic representation of dominance, power, and superiority as the slave master. "Sethe is stopped after she cuts two-year-old Beloved's throat with a hand saw. The child dies" (117). Sethe doesn't want "...her children to be taken back into slavery..." (Matus, 1998: 104)

Sethe felt that killing her children was the only way to protect them from the horrors of slavery she had herself suffered and to secure their safety. Rather than surrender her children to the life of dehumanizing slavery, she flees with them to the woodshed and tries to kill them. Only the third child, her older daughter, dies, her throat having been cut with a handsaw by Sethe. After the death of Sethe's first daughter and third child, "crawling already? Baby" (99) the house is horrid with full of baby's venom. Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar flee from a house haunted by the ghost of Sethe's third child. "124 was spiteful. Full of venom" (1) "spite from the baby's ghost" (12). Sethe dares to kill her child that influences her motherhood. By 1873, Sethe lives in self-imposed isolation with only Denver for the human company until the visit of Paul D. Paul D endured slavery with Sethe on the Kentucky farm 'Sweet home'. The memory of the past takes Sethe to the cruel white man during slavery.

Toni Morrison uses series of flashbacks as a narrative technique to take readers back to the time of slavery at the plantation of sweet home and to demonstrate the power of past on the present.

Sethe was sold to the Garners who owned Sweet Home. After the death of her master, sadistic, vehemently racist brother-in-law runs the farm. He is known to the slaves as a school teacher, and his oppressive presence makes life on the plantation even more unbearable than it had been before.

School teacher treats the slaves like farm stock, measuring their body parts and studies them like biological specimens. Once, Sethe overheard him giving a lesson to his nephews about her, instructing them to categorize each of her characteristics as either human or animal. "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (193). When "a cruel man called school-teacher becomes the master, the slaves attempt a group escapes" (116). During this flight, some of the slaves die.

2.2 Rape and Incest

Walker's novel *The Color Purple* begins with the scene of the rape. Celie is beaten, abused, exploited, and humiliated by her father and husband. She cannot tell this trauma to anybody.

After the death of Celie's mother, Sethe she is repeatedly raped by her father. He says not to reveal it to anyone. Then he says "...you better shut up and git used to it" (3). She becomes pregnant twice. Celie becomes a mother of two children born of the incestuous union but they are sold by Alphonso.

Celie's life is the representation of the female slaves whose children were forcefully taken away by the slave masters who enjoyed the financial gain by selling their children. Even when Celie's children were taken from her, she had to remain silent. Once married, Celie, although not much better off as Albert's possession, is at least free of the incest she has been subjected to under Alphonso's roof. Furthermore, Celie's marriage allows her to preserve Nettie from a similar fate.

Sex continues to be a means of oppression since Celie's adolescent. In the beginning, however, Celie cannot make too much sense of her experiences; she is rather the passive victim of her environment. In one of her letters Celie writes: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1). Celie strikes the words "I am" and replaces it with "I have" also because the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself for her trauma and believes that this bad thing has happened to her because she is bad and therefore deserves it. She is so unsure about her own existence that she erases "I am" and instead writes "I have". She is insecure about the present and the future and therefore she writes about the past. In the beginning, she is oppressed that she is ready to erase herself but the letters save her from total disappearance.

Celie requests for guidance because she does not understand what is happening to her. What is happening to her is that she is pregnant after Pa's raping her. But she is ignorant about the changes her body is undergoing and the reasons for it. As a result, the birth of her first child comes as a complete surprise to her. Only fourteen, but she is pregnant with her second child. The mere survival has become an act of great courage in Celie's life. In the words of Birch Walker suggests that "...child-rape, incest..." (222) is an undeniable fact of most blacks' lives.

Sexual exploitation and oppression are thus introduced as the most relevant factors that shaped Celie's life. Her sexual abuse becomes endemic after Celie's two successive pregnancies and deliveries. The reason of significance of Celie's rape scene is that there is not a race issue. Celie is black and her stepfather is black, as well. This incident displays that being a member of a black family is dangerous for a female. These facts are the representatives of a black female's life. According to Evans, Celie is demonstrated "...the black woman as oppressed ..." (163).

Morrison's novel *Beloved*, at first, violence, is seen in the scene that shows the white men's attacking. The nephew of Schoolteacher attacks Sethe when her husband isn't at home. Especially, "...violence against women" (Kubitschek, 1998: 28-29) is the focus of *Beloved*. White nephews of Schoolteacher "Schoolteacher's nephews brutally abuse Sethe sexually, sucking milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody" (116). Sethe expresses this brutality by saying "And they took my milk" (20). This incident affects Sethe deeply and she always remembers the viciousness of white man.

Sethe is whipped by a schoolteacher for reporting his misdeeds to Mrs. Garner leaving her back leathery with scars. Sethe wants to feed her own baby her breast milk but is prevented from it. Her milk is suckled by the nephews of the schoolteacher.

3. CONCLUSION

The novels *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* are set in post-slavery. They are saturated with violence and other forms of oppressive behavior towards women. The women in the novels bear gender, class and racial discrimination which are often expressed through violence and sexual abuse.

In both novels, African women are unable to better themselves and transcend their class. Black women and slaves are not permitted to educate themselves. Although the starting point and focus of the two novels are different, it can be concluded that the situation for African American women is complicated. Race, gender, and class play a huge role in the lives of black women, but they are entwined to such an extent that it is impossible to pinpoint one of the forms of oppression without taking the others into consideration.

In the novel, *The Color Purple* the perpetrators are mostly black male from within the community. This shows that living in the black community does not guarantee black women to be much better off. Especially, Celie is discriminated because of her gender. Initially, Celie is seen as completely powerless. She is an object for others, is very passive in her interactions, especially those with men. *The Color Purple* is a novel of transcendence. Walker shows her readers oppressed women and transformed men. A greater transformation is seen in Mr. Albert from tyrant to a human being. But Celie's curse is quite effective. Celie and Shug desert Mr. Albert. After so many years, with the help of the black women, Sofia, Shug and Nettie she becomes brave and independent. Gates, Jr. Opines that "...Celie frees herself from her husband's repressive control" (16). The focus of the novel is "... black women's struggle for independence" (17).

Albert becomes close to death, shuts himself up in his house. He is haunted by a life of meanness. He starts to improve only after listening to his son, Harpo's advised to send the rest of Nettie's letters to Celie. Celie finds her identity as a woman and as a useful member of her community. The efforts of the protagonist end in success.

The Color Purple is a story about personal transformation and empowerment of oppressors especially black women. Her life illustrates that being passive about a negative condition creates victimhood. By reading the novel one can understand that by fighting against adversity, one can examine identity, discover selfhood and become free from the bondage of oppressive.

In the novel *Beloved* the horrors of slavery lead Sethe to commit an act of violence against her child. Though Sethe justifies the murder as her way of sending her children to a better existence this justification does no good to Sethe psychologically. She even challenges the white male authority by killing her daughter that no one, nobody on this earth would test her daughter's characteristics of the animal side on the paper. Thus, she restores her human dignity as well as her child's and denies the right of the whites to possess her family as slaves.

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