

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN POST-COLONIAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

Black women are seen at the intersection of racism, imperialism and sexism where they are categorized as non-white and colonial subjects who are considered as machines of reproduction. They are treated as slaves or workers even in their homeland. Women writers explore the issues faced by black women and portray them as beautiful creation of God who is no more oppressed as they were for 1000 of years. This paper seeks to explore the efforts of some of these women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker who were committed to the survival and completeness of the black women.

Key words: Racism, Imperialism, Sexism, Black, Women, Reproduction.

INTRODUCTION

The black feminist writers aim at demolishing the negative portrayal of black people especially by the white writers. Alice Walker and other writers like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston have always been concerned with the females facing problems. Their works basically deal with sexism, gender inequality, slavery, oppression of women, preservation of black culture etc. They present their people as complete and not as downtrodden who were suppressed for many years. Though these writers wrote for a particular race yet they have a universal appeal because all these problems are same among all human beings.

Zora Neale Hurston didn't get any recognition by the literary world. She got attention after the publication of article "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" written by Alice Walker in which Walker appreciates her writings. Neale Hurston exposed her African-American experiences and her struggles as an African-American woman in her writings. She discussed the contemporary issues in the black community in her fictions.

The story of female slavery of black women is just like the story of phoenix. They faced many problems and a lot of sufferings but remained successful in redefining themselves. The African American women proved very resilient enough to win against the odds. Though having same inheritance, men and women did not experience slavery the same way because slave women experienced sexual exploitation, child bearing and motherhood etc and were exploited for their reproductive as well as productive capacities. The slave black women were not even given proper medical care. This was because they were assumed to be less fragile and therefore needed less care. The white women were viewed as pious and domestic whereas blacks were considered

sensual and promiscuous. They had to work very hard. In plantations, they were made to work like men. They pulled logs by leather straps attached to their shoulders. They ploughed using mule or ox and sometimes worked with the heaviest implements available.

Toni Morrison, one of the leading personalities in contemporary American African Literature, was awarded with Nobel Prize for her writings. The theme of her writings is notion of race, color, black slavery and discrimination. She focuses on black women but didn't mention her works as feminist writings. Morrison's *Sula* is a lesbian novel but explores the issues of family unit and important feminist questions about black women's agency showing how black women influence each other's lives.

Black men were also not dependable for them and they were equally powerless so the women could not depend upon them for protection. They were good for nothing but they also showed their male chauvinism on black women. Therefore black women had to protect themselves, some were so bold that they fought against their white masters very bravely. The other ways of resistance were feigning illness, ignorance etc. Being slaves, they attempted to shape the peculiar institutions in ways that allowed them preserve their dignity and affirm their humanity. The women working in fields and plantations formed groups and started helping each other. They started sharing their responsibilities like child rearing etc. this thing helped slaves to cope up with the problems of maternal care for a child. The African American women since slavery have struggled individually and in groups spontaneously and in formal organizations. By 19th century, African American women began to express their concern publicly. Though during 19th century, most of black women were living as slaves but free black women participated in the abolitionist cause. Women like Maria Stewart, E.W. Harper and Truth spoke on black women right. By the end of 19th century, various clubs and organizations came to support black women's rights and gave priority to social and political issues that affected black people and specially women.

Many movements came up to rebel against racism. But ironically, those movements were held only for the liberation of black males only. The condition of black women remained same. They faced problems of racism on the whole and also problems of sexism within their own community. The late 19th century prominently thrust women at the forefront of political scenario. During this period also, they were facing inequality at every level. They were subjected to unfair treatment. They were denied the right to vote. Though doing same work, they were paid less than the males. These issues were highlighted in the period i.e. 1906-1914 and finally, all over the world, the women's movement, which was marginalized, came to full swing.

Alice Walker, a famous American black woman poet, novelist and prose writer gave the concept of *Womanism*, a term which was different from *Feminism*. She discussed miserable life of black people especially black women in her writings. She highlighted terror of black women's lives and mentions them as the victim of inhumane slavery, plunder and oppression in society. The *Color Purple* by Alice Walker is one of the most representative novels which represent the plight of a black girl. It is the story of a poor black girl, Celie. The novel is written in epistolary form. With help of these letters, we get an insight into Celie's life. Her first letter is written when she is fourteen years old. Her mother gave birth to a child and got ill after delivery. A man whom Celie calls 'Pa' got tired of waiting for sex and therefore, he started raping Celie. Soon she got pregnant

with his child and she had to quit her school. She got pregnant with a second child by the time her mother died. After each birth, 'Pa' took the child away and Celie guessed that he had sold them to someone. After her mother's death, Celie took care of all the children including her younger sister, Nettie. After that, she was forced to marry a man of Pa's age whom she called 'Mr'. Mr had four children from his first wife and he also had an affair with a lady named 'Shug'. Celie's life with Mr was almost as bad as her life with 'Pa'. She got beatings very frequently and was forced to work as a slave.

After a long journey of suffering Celie came to know about her children and she left Mr's house. Shug helped her a lot. Through Nettie's letters, Celie came to know that 'Pa' was their step father and the dry goods store and house in which they lived belonged to their real father and naturally passed to her after Pa's death. Finally, Celie was the owner of a dry goods store and also a big house.

Walker admires the struggle of black women in her works. *The Color Purple* articulates the struggles of black women in America. Through Celie, Walker has illustrated the predicament of a defenceless black woman. Celie is benumbed with sexual violence committed by her step father and accepted her worthlessness as even a human being. We find gender bias and oppression of women as a powerful theme of this novel as the powerless women are being suppressed by equally powerless men of their own community. Story of this novel chronicles the life of a black African American girl.

To conclude, Black American women writers like Alice Walker know that they are strong and intelligent and have capabilities to prove themselves as independent human beings. They leave us with hope that black women's inner self could be defined. They are fighting battles on the behalf of not only millions of black women but also for the whole community of women who are treated as second sex all over the world.

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