

ELEMENTS OF MARGINALITY IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA AND ALICE WALKER'S COLOR PURPLE: A RE- READING OF FEMALE TENDENCIES IN A COMPARATIVE STYLE

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Abstract:

Both the novels, Sula and Colour purple reflect major themes of feminism and oppression in the African-American context, with some differences. However, the major part remains the same. Abuse in its worst form was seen. Alice Walker's The Color Purple portrays the subjugation of African American women, being black and being women together. The novel actually is a strong narrative of Celie who, as a poor, uneducated and ugly, black girl, raped by her own father did not have the temerity to be with her own two children.. Celie gets married to a man who further abuses her both physically and mentally. The trauma that strikes Celie is tremendous, heart wreathing and traumatic. . The character Sula, had the ability to take control over a situation by means of violation in order to protect herself from more oppression.Sula tries to create and control her identity. That's the way she could also control her life. She developed relationships with many men. She does not care about what others would think about her and also did not believe in the traditional, conventional role of the women in her society. She did whatever she wanted; she was highly independent too! But we have other characters also. Nel is in the clutches of the cultural myths of the society. Totally opposite to Sula. A woman in a male dominant society can never has to face the fate of it; to listen to the men and live their lives according to their wishes.. This novel revolves around two characters- Nel and Sula, their friendship and kinship and relationship. There are other themes like violence and deaths, sadness and tragic ends.

Keywords: Marginality, Sexual abuse, independence, subjugation, society, myth, convention, human rights.

Much drawn are the ethos and sensibilities of a woman in a patriarchal society where violence may be muted, thawed, stalled or further aggregated and later on and even

then sublimed by silence and moderation in speech. Much is because of abjection of their gender which though is supposed to be the supreme, as it nurtures the human kind but when portrayed in a common lens, gender based violence speaks of discrimination faced by women on grounds of physical, sexual, psychological and economic suffering. The suffering becomes suffocation and ultimately the woman lives a tumultuous life. Toni Morrison's works have brought the black literature in spotlight whereas Alice Walker's works are influenced by the atrocities on black women in America; much is also drawn from the personal experiences of Walker.

The pages of history tell expressly about female domination in different parts of the world. Many of them were deprived with their human rights as well. Both the novels, *Sula* and *Colour purple* reflect major themes of feminism and oppression in the African-American context, with some differences. However, the major part remains the same. Abuse in its worst form was seen.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* portrays the subjugation of African American women, being black and being women together. The novel actually is a strong narrative of Celie who, as a poor, uneducated and ugly, black girl, raped by her own father did not have the temerity to be with her own two children.. Celie gets married to a man who further abuses her both physically and mentally. The trauma that strikes Celie is tremendous, heart wrenching and traumatic. Efforts by Celie lead her further to mentally prepare herself for a better, at least not a suffocated life any more. The narrative talks about how she tries to come out of her suffering. Celie at first appears to be powerless to be against the oppression and brutality of both black and white men. Slowly, with a long passage of time, and with the help of her friends Sofia and Shug Avery, she realizes that she is also born to act according to her will. She had to overcome her fear. Albert's sisters, Kate and Carrie tell Celie, "You got to fight them, Celie, I can't do it for you" (Walker 21). Celie knew that much fear had been inflicted upon her and that she had a significant agony in her heart and soul. It's evident that men try to inflict fear upon women and keep them undermined!

She can't be subjugated by anyone. With this thought in mind, after so many years of racial oppression, sexual abuse, brutal sufferings at the hands of black women, she starts speaking against such evils in the human society and strives to liberate other such women from the clutches of both black and white men. Celie, over a period of time, gains internal strength and become revitalized. In *Colour Purple*, Albert asked Harpo to beat his wife and Sofia to make her do what he tells her to do (Walker 35). Harpo once asked his father why he hit Celie and to that he replied, "Because she is my wife" (Walker 22). Therefore, we see such emotional and physical abuse also in the novel. Men, who boast of belonging to a particular class and domination, always show that they controlled their women and therefore had power and status and the other way round too. Many a time, they controlled their children so as to have full control over their families. The Chief of Olinka village had forced the children to carve identification onto their faces in desperation to save their

culture; much to undergo scarification (Walker 239). Therefore, Tashi the character was left with no choice and felt ashamed of her scars; she could hardly lift her face and face others! Similarly, Celie was told by her Step father to be married to Albert so that she could take care of her children and also submit to his sexual demands after the death of Annie Julia , his late wife(Walker 12). All these instances truly show how the men , as a ruling, dominant class gains control over their women .

Walker says, “It is such. The husband has life and death per over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives with witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed”(Walker 163) Men are allowed to go anywhere, behave anyhow as they wish but women can't , they are not free ! There is some difference in the sexual orientation of the lovers in Alice Walker's Color Purple. Shug hold Celie , totally reclaiming the female sexuality , talking virginity and female genitalia. Enjoyment through sexual pleasure or sensual pleasure by reinventing female sexual desires sets the major narrative in the novel. Shug believed that and also made Celie believe that female sexual pleasure acts as a laboratory mechanism. The gender roles seem entangling and diminishing, sexual roles ..all homosexual and heterosexual ; but all in harmony ! The story of Color Purple is written in an epistolary manner where the protagonist, Celie feels the need to tell her story using the black vernacular. The novel showcases letters filled with elements of desires, emotional sufferings etc; the letters like letter from Celie to Nettie, Celie to god and Nettie to Celie form the spine of the novel. Through the letters, Celie is able to tell about the abuse that she had suffered and ultimately able to speak about it. Nettie's letters talk about difficulties of communication between men and women, black and white, both in America and Africa.

Celie's belief in god gradually changes from fear to hatred, ““What God do for me”? Iast . . . he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (walker 173). She writes in her first letter to god , “Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children”. (Walker 3)

The story proceeds when Celie's alleged father tries to strike another sexual encounter with his wife , who had shortly delivered a baby; she shows discomfort. He then rapes his oldest daughter and pressurizes her to do what her mother did not want to do(Walker 20) Alphonso imposes the bond of silence on Celie stating that she should keep silent on each instance, otherwise , he would kill her mother. She could, however, tell everything to God ! Celie becomes pregnant with his so called father's child , which her mother never knew, because of Celie's silence,; eventually Celie is sold in a slave auction.

In this novel, much sexual abuse and violence towards women is seen to be executed by black men and not the whites. Celie has been completely objectified ...controlled by her father and also by her husband later. Shug Avery describes Albert as a person who mistreats others through verbal and physical abuse “You black, you pore , you ugly, you a woman. Goddamn . . . you nothing at all” (Walker 187). Similarly, abuse can be seen when Harpo insists in marrying Sofia, he says again in the same fashion: “young womens no good these days, . . .Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry” (Walker 31) Women in the novel are continuously degraded and subdued ; once celie also told Harpo that in order to make Sophia work or react or act, he needed to beat her up into submission. But then hurriedly , Celie realize her mistake and apologizes “I’m so shame of myself, I say. And the Lord he done whip me little bit to. The Lord don’t like ugly, she say. And he ain’t stuck on pretty. This open the way for our talk. . .” (Walker 39).

Celie and Shug slowly develop good relations and now Celie, after a long time of subjugation and oppression realizes that she would be able to speak her heart out. But then, Shug demands of another fling to which Celie remains uncomfortable. Shug appears to be highly independent, aesthetic expressive but erotic and spiritual in the novel, one who actively tries to shape Celie’s character. To live life with boldness and style in the face of adversity and absurdity. Much of her independence came from her profession of singing. Shug had three children from Albert , her intended husband and lover but she left the children with her parents and moves out to pursue her career. Celie was sick of becoming pregnant, bear children. When Celie loses her ability to menstruate, she literally becomes happy as she had become free of becoming pregnant from the man who she hates. Celie had faith in god but the object of faith is replace from god to a white man to the love for nature by Shug. : “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (Walker 177). Although Celie suffers a lot , yet she channelizes her rage into creativity and eventually becomes a designer of folk pants . Shug makes it a point to provide her with full artistic freedom. Celie’s pants follow the “ethical and aesthetical shift from worshipping the white male God to appreciating the presence of spirit and color” (Walker 227). Celie’s creative geniuses of pants are not white but purple and red and have various prints on them. Her art work could define thoughts beyond what she had suffered –from child bride to capitalist entrepreneur.

Walker portrays her women as mentally stronger than men and reflects various shades of men who try to adapt to the female culture of nurturing philosophy, and acceptance. Sexuality and feminism has been therefore dealt with both as a power tool and as a liberatory device.

In Sula, also, we find similar narratives. Eva’s marriage was very short lived. Her husband was totally insensitive. He used to drink, abuse, cheat on his office and leaves a negligible sum of amount for his three children, when he left her (Morisson 32) . He had a negligent attitude, carelessness, treated women like an object which may be thrown

anywhere. At the same time, we can see a different picture with other characters in Sula. The character Sula, had the ability to take control over a situation by means of violation in order to protect herself from more oppression. Sula tries to create and control her identity. That's the way she could also control her life. She developed relationships with many men . She does not care about what others would think about her and also did not believe in the traditional, conventional role of the women in her society. She did whatever she wanted; she was highly independent too ! But we have other characters also. Nel is in the clutches of the cultural myths of the society. Totally opposite to Sula.

A woman in a male dominant society can never has to face the fate of it; to listen to the men and live their lives according to their wishes.. This novel revolves around two characters- Nel and Sula, their friendship and kinship and relationship. There are other themes like violence and deaths, sadness and tragic ends. Many people argue that the novel has a lesbian theme . But the fact is that , Morisson uses a female as an image. The essence of the story lies in self realization, self- understanding, understanding of each other and other emotions that can be really expressed . The initial sexual encounter between Nel and Sula unites them in a bond and it is the same sexual encounter that drives them apart.(Sula 64). It was Sula who declines to be with Nel, in fact, she decides not have sexual conduct between them. This betrayal sets them apart. Sula also feels apart from her immediate community and surroundings. She felt alienated; stopped all communication, gets exhausted, and ultimately dies. There is other character also, but Sula and Nel continue to be the main characters. It is difficult to understand who was good and evil between Nel and Sula . Both were much committed to each other . Both of them evolve as characters in the novel, although they may initially not be centric to the novel. But the deat of Sula in the story appears to be a high element in the story. Because Sula dies because of alienation, being incommunicado. She actually loses herself to herself. However, Nel moves on ahead in her life and many a time denies the loss of her childhood friend. The character of Eva appears to be a dominant and undisputed character (Morisson 65) .

She appears to be prophetic when she comments," It was the last as well as the first time Nel was evrr to leave Medallion"(Morisson 29) . The novel focusses on the life events of all the characters from 1919 to 1965 whereby all the themes are structurally placed. Many argue that the novel has discontinuity, missing subjects and other elements in form and content.

Many characters in this novel appear for a shorter time , some disappear , or die , like Sula. This actually becomes a mourning affair for others in the novel. That people miss their kins is an integral part of the novel and also reflects African American Culture and its history. There are gaps in time in the novels. Nel and Sula spent five years as girl friends . Nel gets married to Jude and when Sula has a sexual encounter with Jude ten years later. Both Nel and Sula get physically separated thereafter. Apart from this the novel reflects

major world events like World wars and the period of Depression . But the lives of Sula and Nel, their personal struggles are more important in Bottom, their town. History says that African American communities had been subjected to an organized racism, with brutality and oppression, destruction of communities etc. The town, Bottom, functions as symbol in the novel, and the prologue of the novel sets the perfect setting of the theme of destruction in the novel. The concept of Self and the other has been developed in the novel. The women were perceived as the other and men as self. Bottom, was a black neighborhood in America and the existing black neighborhood including this is demolished for construction of a big golf course. The women have been objectified and the men treated as subjects.

In African American literature, the women have been treated as the double other. In such a society and situation, Sula creates a self outside of society . In fact, both Nel and Sula created the concept of 'another self ' but with an innate bond. This ' self' could not exist without the other and therefore with the loss of friendship with Nel, Sula loses herself and dies. Women in this novel represent different aspects of class, colour, and matrilineal genealogies. Eva, Hannah, Sula are representative of the working class and Rochelle, Helene and Nel represent " the bourgeois ascendance from disavowal of subaltern black origins rendered shameful and inaccessible by the bourgeois morality of domesticity and respectability"(Morrison 47). Nel has been portrayed as daughter of Helene Wright ,who was herself was the daughter of a prostitute ,brought up by her grandmother " under the dole some eyes of a multicolored virgin Mary"(Morrison 17) Helene tried her best to imbibe in Nel the values of orderliness and humility and to be constantly on guard and of subjugation. Nel had once witnessed public humiliation with her mother and decided to be on guard ever since.so that no man could ever look at her in that way or behave with her in a demeaning manner. "That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly" (Morrison 29). Nel definitely followed her mother's track as a leading pathway in life. That day was an eye opener and the trip "was the last as well as the first time she was ever to leave Medallion" (Morrison 29).

Nel initially did not befriend Sula as she thought that Sula's mother was kina sooty(Morrison 29). The story also its instances where Helene talks about men with whom she had multiple affairs(Morrison 69) and with that a growing Sula learnt that female sexuality has a great meaning, sexual intercourse needed to be frequent and it was pleasant (Morrison 44) . Evidently, these relationships would separate her from Nel, later; the ones who considered themselves as two halves when they met at the age of twelve. It appears as if there is a spiritual connection between Sula and Nel , who are totally dependent on each other for the things that they lack in themselves and find expression in the 'other halves of each other'. Their selves melting into each other, both Sula and Nel , as if in dreams , felt solace in each others' company as if there was nothing to hide, to reveal...intoxicated with each other's presence(Morrison 51). Indeed, there was a sexual

attraction , developing into a relationship between the two girls; however, it gave them strength together (Morisson 52) “in concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence” (Morrison 58). One thing is taken for granted and that is Nel and Sula were inseparable from each other; that they were one and the same thing (Morisson 119). At the age of 17 , Nel marries Jude , an African American who desperately wishes to fulfill whatever he can. He is denied a job on the New River road and he promptly decides to tell about this to Nel and not Sula. He believed as if women would love talking about misery, real misery considered as their singly own (Morrison 83). He makes efforts to distance her from Sula. Nel succumb to the middle class morality which her mother wanted to be in !

There are other narratives in the novel talking about Hannah’s increased appetite for men, while Eva’s hatred for her husband grew ! There are dialogues between the people, despite, all love and hatred prevailing. Many of them appear to be ethical deliberations. Eva eventually learns to control her situation, but keeps herself in sync with the African American neighborhoods.

Morrison uses death as an aesthetic image in the novel as could be seen through the characters of Shadrack, a soldier’s experience of the hallows of death in the battlefield. This is also seen when Chicken Little disappears in the water . The drowning is described as “peaceful. There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing” (Morisson 61). It is quite mentally disturbing to the readers when they experience how Sula says on the death bed that she enjoyed in the aesthetics of the burning Hannah, wrapped in flames (Morisson 78). Morrison ultimately talks about the stream of consciousness through the character of Nel. Morrison describes Nel’s thighs as “truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” (Morisson 111). There are two different things both represented through sexuality-she becomes sexually rejuvenated with the news of Sula’s return and again loses her personal sexuality with the loss of Sula.

Thus, Feminism is portrayed in a distinct form of sexuality in Sula. The major aspect of the novel continues to be the relationship of Nel and Sula , reflecting features of imagination, emotional turmoil and displacement through the character of Sula. . Her “idle imagination” is blamed for her whims: “had she painted, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or the strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity” . . . she might have had a meaningful life (Morrison 121). Sula disbelieved her mother’s opinion on loving the man with whom she slept with , and considered that “a lover was not a comrade and could never be— for a woman” (Morrison 121). With the relationship that Sula had with

Ajax, she believed that atleast she some genuine conversations and that she would come out aesthetically in the relationship, as Ajax has aesthetic temperaments.(Morisson 127-128). Although, Nel spends another twenty five years following Sula's death; mourning the loss of her marriage and exercising the role of a victimized woman. She says," Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. "All that time, all that time I thought I was missing Jude....." "We was girls together", she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula", she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (Morisson 174)

Both Morisson and Walker present different shades of the same thing- A female's world in the African American parlance. The women through various incidents become depressed, subjugated and live in man's world where they face brutality and oppression ; then where is the question of male and female companionships, camaraderie and friendship, love ? Both the authors have beautifully penned down the sufferings of women and the ways and means through which their lives proceed . Both the novels demonstrate some friendship between black women and also reflect various aspects of emotional health and seeking spirit of happiness. The oppressed community seeks its participation in influencing social structure through cultural and aesthetic mirrors of the society. The characters appear to argue against alienation and isolation and try to interject themselves into the dominant class.

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