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Discourse of resistance in the select novels of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston

Pragya Shanker • Anuja Shanker • Shalini Sahai
• Sahar Rahman

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Corresponding Author : Sahar Rahman

Abstract : *African-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre traces its origin to the works of late eighteenth century writers such as Phillis Wheatley. This research work is based on the study of four novels- Zora Neale Hurston's 'Their Eyes were Watching God', Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye' and 'Beloved' and Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'. We have studied the following aspects of the above*

mentioned novels—portrayal of women, role of patriarchy, racism and gender roles and tried to bring out how these works voice the resistance of the women writers against sexuality, patriarchy, racism and violence.

Key words : *Discourse, Resistance, Gender Equality, Sexual Inequality, Patriarchy, Upliftment.*

Pragya Shanker

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2008-2011,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Anuja Shanker

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2008-2011,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Shalini Sahai

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2008-2011,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Sahar Rahman

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna – 800 001, Bihar, India
E-mail : saharr@rediffmail.com

Introduction :

African-American (or Black-American or Afro-American) literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre traces its origin to the works of late eighteenth century writers such as Phillis Wheatley, reached its early high point with the Harlem Renaissance, and continues today with authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, who have been ranked among the top writers in the United States.

Before the American Civil War, African American literature primarily focused on the issue of slavery. Today it has been accepted as an integral

part of American literature with novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

African-American women novelists provide a glimpse into the revised hermeneutics of African American experience and expression. Each author uses language and the literary tradition to upset binary opposites, to highlight the discrepancy between white perceptions and African realities.

These women novelists explore the very issues of freedom and equality which were long denied to Blacks in the United States. Their writing style has much of the cadence and character present in the Black speech patterns, bringing the reader right into the Black experience. The most recurrent themes include the exploration of self-expression along with themes related to African-American culture, racism, religion, and slavery. Modern and Postmodern African-American literature portrays the impact of suffering on character, achievement, and insight. For instance, it is Pecola's suffering and self-hatred that lead to her demise in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

The objective of this research work is to study the discourse of resistance in the select novels of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, who have been ranked among the top writers in the United States. The novels which have been taken up are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. This research paper applies Feminist literary theory to the study of these novels.

Feminism is a political, cultural and economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. It also advocates gender equality for women's campaigns, rights and

interests. Feminism in literature aims at exposing the mechanism of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. "It explores the nature of female world and outlook, and restructures the lost or suppressed records of female experience." (Barry, 2002: 122).

Since Feminism is a vast area of study, this research work takes into account four major areas viz. portrayal of women, role of patriarchy, racism and gender roles.

There is a positive representation of women, more specifically of Black women in the four novels. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in the beginning, Janie has no voice. However, through her relationship with Tea Cake, she experiences true fulfillment and enlightenment and eventually she liberates herself from each of her three domineering relationships. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly. But Claudia and Frieda support her throughout. They stand up against the unfair treatment they receive at the hands of society, while Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved* is raped and beaten. Nevertheless, she copes with the painful incidents better than the male characters. She even kills her infant daughter to save her from the life of slavery. In *The Color Purple*, Walker's characters move in a circulatory pattern : the suspended woman who, is cruelly exploited, and her spirits and body mutilated; the thwarted woman who desires to be a part of mainstream American life and the modern woman who exhibits the qualities of the developing emergent model.

Role of patriarchy has been exposed and patriarchal structures demolished in these novels. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston reveals the dominant male psyche of contemporary times

through her male characters. There are three major male characters in the novel, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks and Tea Cake who enjoy the patriarchal prerogatives. They want to control and rule the lives of the women in the novel. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* shows the indoctrination of patriarchal practices. In a patriarchal hegemonic society, girls are forced to sell their body for a livelihood and women are relegated to the role of passive sexual objects: "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, 1970:122). In *Beloved*, Sethe rejects patriarchy and leaves her husband, Halle. She even finds a job and raises three of her children without any male help. Thus, she leads a self-determined and independent life. In *The Color Purple*, patriarchy manifests itself in Celie's self-enclosure and the epistolary enclosure. Celie is pushed by Pa towards recognizing the "male law". Ironically, Celie must resort to a male God to undo what Pa has done to her.

Racism is another issue which has been resisted vehemently by these novelists. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shows how even Black people become racists and that they have nothing to argue against it. In the novel, Janie and Tea Cake experience prejudice from both Blacks and Whites. However, racism is a force that challenges Janie in her quest to achieve harmony with the world around her. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is insulted throughout for being Black. For instance, boys call her 'Black e mo-Black e mo', a racist insult. So, a light complexion is highly desired by Pecola as it is considered as an attribute of physical beauty. *Beloved* focuses on a community of ex-slaves and how they manage to get on track with their lives. It shows that a coloured man is like any other man. It

also addresses the concern of whether it is better to endure the injustices of the Whites or to fight against them. In *The Color Purple*, Walker challenges racial boundaries, portraying new ways for Blacks and Whites to create a shared sense of community. Eleanor Jane (the daughter of the woman who had got Sofia into trouble), for example, takes a step in correcting injustice towards Sofia by going to work for her. Celie hires Sofia as a clerk in her store to work together with a white man, so that everyone could be well served.

Gender roles are important in all the four novels. Each novel presents the story of transformation, of the will of one woman against all the men in her life, of the strength, faith and friends can give one another, and finally of the happiness one finds in being content with what one has. In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is prohibited from speaking her mind, playing checkers and attending male funerals. Black women are treated like animals: "It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens." (Hurston, 1937:70-71). In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison has described the world wide gender disparity through her characters Pecola, Frieda, Pauline and the narrator Claudia, who once mentions in the novel that three things have greatly affected her life: being a child, being a Black and being a girl. All the women characters are abused by both white women and men, as well as by Black men. Tragically, Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter, Pecola, in a gesture of madness mingled with affection. He realizes he loves her, but the only way he can express it is to rape her. In 'Beloved', Sethe's fearlessness proves her gender blurred character. She is physically very strong, even stronger than her two sons. She even leads an independent life after her escape from Sweet Home.

The Color Purple subverts and defies the traditional ways in which we understand women to be women, and men to be men. Many characters in the novel break the boundaries of traditional male or female gender roles. Sofia's strength, Shug's sexual assertiveness and Harpo's insecurity are major examples of such disparity between a character's gender and traits he/she displays.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, a 'boldly feminist' novel contains the message of feminist awakening and self discovery of women. It has also been appreciated for the use of Black dialect, descriptive language and contrasting language style. 'The Bluest Eye' has been appreciated for its accurate rendering of folk idiom, its use of oral storytelling tradition and also for the characterization of Pecola, the protagonist. It has been criticized for its controversial nature because it boldly portrays problems such as child molestation and racism. 'Beloved' has been praised for Morrison's style which is graphic, evocative and "unwhite" and also for its exploration of gender differences and the experiences of Blacks. It has been criticized by some for being an unconvincing and confusing ghost story. The novel 'The Color Purple' has been praised for the portrayal of the African-American woman's life and for the skilful recreation of Black folk speech. It is criticized at the same time for the negative portrayal of men in the novel. Hence, all the four novels deal with the oppression of women, discovery of women's self, sisterhood and racism.

Thus, Black women novelists, especially Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have tried in every possible manner to examine women's social roles and experiences. In their writings, they have strongly resisted the patriarchal and racial subjugation of Black women and taken an initiative in the field of women emancipation and upliftment.

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