

**The Wheel of Oppression in Alice Walker's the Color
Purple and Toni Morrison's
The *Bluest Eye***

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Abstract

Being the heavy weights of African American Literature, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have sketched the most visually stirring portrayal of black people, particularly women. Readers get very much fascinated with the works, *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye*, because, each word in the novel transparently depicts the real traumatic life. Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel, *The Color Purple*, and is also an acclaimed poet and essayist. This novel chronicles the struggles of several black women in rural Georgia in the first half of the twentieth century. It is an epistolary novel, which weaves an intricate mosaic of women joined by their love for each other. Morrison's novels are known for their picturesque depiction of the suppression of women and it is knitted with lucid dialogues. The impact of these works is heart wrenching and it stays for a longer period in our heart of hearts. The research paper aims to picturise the theme of oppression, deferred dreams, the humiliations, the trials and tribulations that they underwent as a black woman.

Key Words: Oppression, Tribulation, Black Feminism, Womanism, Double Slavery, Blackness

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in Georgia. She worked as a social worker, teacher, and lecturer, and took part in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. Growing up with an oral tradition, listening to stories from her grandfather, she began writing when she was eight years old. The tragedy of losing her eye enabled Walker to understand that, the appearance is a mere deceptive one and it is important to value someone with their inner purity. She unentangled from the clutches of the society and accomplished her dream of becoming a writer. Her experiences in life reflected in her first collection of poetry, *Once*, which was published in 1968. Walker has written many best sellers. They are, *The Temple of My Familiar* and, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* explores the impacts of female genital mutilation on woman's psyche as well as her body.

Walker's feminism specifically included the advocacy of the colored women. In 1983, she coined the term "Womanism" in her collection of essays entitled, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, meaning "Black Feminism". The term was made to unite colored feminists under one term. Although Walker states that a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color, she insists that a black feminist brings out new demands and different perspectives to feminism, and compels the expansion of feminist horizons in theory and practice. Her construction of womanism and the different meanings she invests in it is an attempt to situate the black woman in history and culture. At the same time, in order to rescue black women from the inaccurate stereotypes that mask them in American society. After more than four decades as a writer, Alice Walker shows no signs of slowing down. She is still bright like the stars in the sky of African American literature.

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931 in Ohio. She was an acclaimed novelist, editor, and professor at Princeton University. Even as a child, she was instilled with a sense of heritage through listening to traditional folktales. Her favorite choices of authors were Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy. Morrison played a vital role in bringing black literature into the mainstream.

Her novels are an exploration of the meaning of blackness, what it means to be black in a white society and to strive for visibility in a society where blackness signifies invisibility. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is the genesis of Morrison's effort to investigate the devastating effects of the beauty standards of the dominant culture. It is not chronologically presented. It

depicts the indescribable sufferings of the black women. The humiliation of marginalization within their own community as well as in white society is effectively revealed.

It is obvious that the novels of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison portray the sufferings of black women in all its forms. Their women characters are discriminated by the white society just because of their colour. They are objectified, their feelings are discarded, and their dreams become deferred. The sculpted characters are chiseled and painted with reality. In the novels of Walker and Morrison, some fortunate black females had the opportunity to find their identity and survive even in such a hard ambience of a highly racial society.

Oppression is an unjust, cruel exercise of authority on someone or a group of people. Both black men and women were subjugated during slavery. But black women were treated like puppets in the hands of both white and black men. They were subjugated to extreme abuse and suppression. They had to tussle against the innumerable stumbling blocks in order to gain recognition even as a human being. Basically, feminism is to battle against the limited opportunities, when compared to men in the spheres of law, education, economy, and social power. Whereas for black women, even those limited opportunities were denied. Men remained as dictators. They were not given any chance to choose what they want. Men made decisions and their only duty was to surrender to them and to obey like a myrmidon. Black women were underdogs, victims of social or political injustice.

The oppression of women mainly stems from men's desire to overpower and control. The same need throughout the history has driven men to conquer and tyrannize other groups or nations. The black men did not have any courage to speak against the white. They did not have autonomy over their own life. These two desperate needs of black men resulted in governing women with an iron hand. Since men feel the need to gain as much power and control as they can, they steal away women's rights and make them dumb. Men direct women's life. By doing so, ultimately they try to increase their sense of significance and status in family and society.

In history, when men are oppressed, it is considered as a tragedy. But, when women are oppressed, it is considered as a tradition. In the name of tradition and superstitious beliefs women are tormented and harassed. Men frame rules for their own convenience and they command women to obey to those rules.

In the novel, *The Color Purple*, there is a reference to genital mutilation, "bloody cutting around puberty" (237). But Walker has discussed and protested vehemently against the Female Genital Mutilation in her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Black women were not at home, most of them worked in the fields along with men. They were required to do physical labour. When they were in the field plowing or collecting cotton, the owner of the slave did not care whether they were women or men. They beat both men and women and very often women were raped. So women receive dual punishments. Despite all the tribulations, women wanted to bring up their children and focused on their future.

Women were subjected to severe suppression and double slavery. The irresponsible men in their life made their life more miserable and worse. In these two selected novels, *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye*, men are portrayed as scatterbrained and capricious husbands and fathers. They do not take care of their wives, children and even their own self. Either the man in the family is a drunkard or a womanizer. They use their wife to satisfy their lustful desires and gratify their physical hunger. They do not take up any responsibilities but find fault with the work done by women. Men beat women black and blue in order to have control over them.

In the novel, *The Color Purple*, Celie is cruelly harassed by her husband Albert. She is sexually brutalized by her father and exploited as a commodity by him and the man she marries. She is sold to Albert in the marriage business. Celie's father says to Albert, "She ugly. Don't even look she kin to Nettie. But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either, and I'll

just be fair, you have to watch her or she'll give away everything you own. But she work like a man."(10). These words show how Celie is treated like a machine to work and to beget children. The double standard attitude towards women is explicit in the words of Celie's father. Women are marginalized and secluded when it comes to decision making but if it is to work she has to toil like a man. The irony is, no man in these novels works hard for the betterment of his family. They either sexually harass or brutally beat. They remain useless and does no work for uplifting their children's future.

Celie after marrying Albert struggles to battle against the nuisance and atrocities caused by him and his children. His children order her and have no respect for her. "They say Celie, I want dis. Celie I want dat. Our Mama let us have it. He don't say nothing."(18). Albert does not take any initiative to discipline his children. Even though they are Albert's children, Celie takes good care of them. Nettie asks Celie to fight against Albert for his and his children's behavior towards her.

Albert remains as the worst example for his children. There is an instance in the novel, where he instills the idea of dominating women and to take women for granted in his son Harpo's young mind. Harpo, once asks his father about why he beats Celie. Albert states that it is his right to beat his wife. "Harpo as his daddy why he beat me. Mr---say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don't finish."(23). He highlights the thought that, women are the weaker sex and so they can be treated according to a man's wish. A father generally is the first hero for all the sons. But Albert remains as a negative specimen for his son. He corrupts the young mind by emphasizing on gender inequality. He treats Celie mercilessly. These evidences authenticate that men were Celie's cruel oppressors. Patience is not a passive quality. Celie remains patiently to all the cruelties. Her transformation into a business woman is an embodiment of women's victory.

Like Celie in the *The Color Purple*, Pauline Williams in *The Bluest Eye* is also subjected to physical and mental shackles by her husband Cholly Breedlove. Their initial wedding period was a colourful one. All those moonlight and roses fade away, and the practical life of dealing with daylight and dishes starts. Pauline keeps the house and starts to feel lonely. In her loneliness, she turns to her husband for reassurance of love, entertainment, to fill the vacant places. Gradually Cholly starts to curb her total independence. They do not communicate with each other properly. Their marriage starts to shred with quarrels. When Cholly begins to quarrel about the money she wanted, she decides to go to work. Taking a job as a day worker helped with the clothes, and even a few things for their apartment. He was not pleased with her purchases. Money became the focus of all their discussions. This is when Cholly started to sexually harass her. Cholly eventually began to be harsh and rude. Pauline worked both at home and outside. He becomes a drunkard and does not worry about his duties and responsibilities. Pauline did her best to revive their relationship. When she discovers that she was pregnant, she told Cholly. He surprised her by behaving in a pleasing manner. He began to drink less and spent time with her. After she gave birth to their son, Cholly's attitude once again changed. Pauline starts to live in the fantasy world which she acquires from movies. The impact of the media was the cause for hatred that she develops for Pecola. She internalizes the ideals of beauty from the movies. She believed that her child was ugly.

Pauline loves to take care of the white master's child whereas she beats her child Pecola black and blue. She finds Pecola lying on the kitchen floor. After that she beats Pecola almost to death. She does not show any motherly affection to her child. When Pecola tells her mother about the rape, she does not believe. Her love for white ideals of beauty stops Pauline from showering love on her daughter.

Mrs. MacTeer also does not give respect to her daughters. She takes them for granted. Throughout the novel, she yells to her daughters. There is no single instance from the novel, where she pleasantly speaks to her daughters. Once when Claudia was ill, she even scolds her for her illness. Claudia desperately wants her mother to comfort her. But she only hears the drone of her mother's voice of complaining. Claudia says, "My mother's fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect, extremely painful in their thrust." (22). Claudia is very much humiliated by her mother's anger and she weeps.

To conclude, the white society was too harsh on African Americans. Not only did the whites degrade the black existence, but also the black people internally damaged its own members through repeated family abuse. Hence throughout their life, the wheel of oppression rotates and does not stop. The authors, being powerful women themselves, have left indelible foot prints in the history of black feminism and have been instrumental in creating an optimistic change in the society by breaking down the stereotypical image and the barriers for the black women in literature.

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