

## **CROSS - CULTURAL SUPPRESSION: FINDING ANSWERS IN THE WORKS OF TONI MORRISON AND INDIAN WRITING**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an insight into the works of writers from various literatures who continue to encourage debate among those who care about the suppressed, downtrodden and the despised section of society. It is to discover their efforts to retrieve, revive, reinvent and redefine elements of color/ caste system in a creative way, by returning to their roots, while looking ahead.

In recent decades or since the last half of the twentieth century, both the traditional and the progressive worlds have been struggling to create a new ideology where everyone irrespective of his caste, color or gender will be treated equally. In the field of literature, new writers and thinkers have helped in carving out a path towards progress and development of the society. Intellectual exchanges and questionings, analysis and deliberations have come handy in changing the creative scenario. The concerns of women's issues, the downtrodden or the subaltern's or of any other marginalized group have found a platform and a new meaning because of the international support and recognition.

Social inequality reflecting through racial and caste-centric institutions have been the cause of huge suffering to the oppressed class in India and in other parts of the world as well. Inspired by the Marxist thought, the earlier literature subsumed castes' oppression within the matrix of class divide and alienation of the working class. The major problem however, is not of economic equality but of national identity. The oppressed workers' caste identity or his caste bound marginalization was neither recognized nor represented in literature. As Ambedkar has said "Caste system is not just about the division of the workers. This is hereditary and workers are divided in a hierarchy". In this "whosoever is born in which ever sub-caste, caste, s/he dies there" (Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar...) Many progressive and prominent upper caste Indian writers took up the cause of the untouchables through their writings. But the solution to the problem they sought was mostly through reformatory measures which brought few changes in the existing structure. A later breed of writers though, brought radical philosophies in the writing by asking about the total transformation of society with justice and freedom for the downtrodden. We have a new social literature which tries to question the authenticity of the age-old traditions of slavery. This trend of literature is battling against these forces and trying to create a new and better space for people who have been exploited since centuries. Dalit literature, New literature,

African-American literature and theories like Post-colonial have helped us a great deal in evaluating and negotiating the problem.

The speciality of Dalit literature is that it speaks of freedom from these unequal social structures and in exceptional cases, opposes the existence of these and declares them as the greatest enemy of change and development. By liberating themselves from social slavery, they can lead a life of self-respect. It can be said that this feeling of self-respect is the essence of Dalit literature. It is the literature within which various layers of struggles of the social history are being carved through past memories. Within these layers lies the oral history of a large segment of society that leads a marginal life out of mainstream because of their 'birth' and 'caste'. It is a literature composed of real experience.

In the African-American literature, the blacks are similarly oppressed by a predominant white American society. To begin with, generally the misunderstandings between American and African-American occur because of a deeply rooted, inherent white American prejudice that they are superior to the latter simply by the virtue of being white. This superior attitude is used as a whipping lash for the African-American. In this paper I propose to discuss the similar process of self-articulation, suppression, and re-emergence of the downtrodden section of societies.

Though concentrating exclusively on the articulation of African-American experience in her fiction, Toni Morrison, the black woman writer and the Nobel Prize winner, reaches out to the entire world, but most specifically to the third world countries like India. Emerging as it does from a specific political economic, social and cultural experience, Morrison's work has considerable interest for the Indian people. The African-American experience and the post-colonial Indian experience have many similarities. The tendency of colonized to imitate the colonizers viewpoint seems to last much after attaining freedom. The inclination on the part of the Indians to validate their thoughts and ideas with reference to western ideology reveals a need to reassess themselves and to reclaim their own heritage and culture as precisely is the case of African American.

Besides the commonality of the third world consciousness, there is another factor that brings Morrison's writing close to Indian experience – the issue of double oppression raised by the Dalit women.

The problem of the double marginalization caused by the system of caste and oppression in India is almost the same as gender oppression in America. Like the African-American, the Indian Dalits, the schedule castes, the schedule tribes as well as the other social and economically oppressed sections of Indian society including women irrespective of their caste and economic status – are a marginalized group.

Furthermore the slavery experience in the United States has some relevance to the system of bonded labor in India, more particularly in Andhra Pradesh rural areas as Laxmi Narasaih observes. Hence the possibility of looking for a comparison between American literature based on slavery and Telugu Dalit literature based on bonded labor. To cite but one instance, Kalipatnam Rama Rao's magnum opus, *Yajnam*, bears an apt comparison with Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved*. Just as *Beloved* deals with psychic conscience of slavery, Rama Rao's *Yajnam* treats the mental agitations created by bonded labor, "Kambaritanam". Both Morrison and Rama Rao seem to be dealing with social psychic interaction with reference to their specific situation. The fact that Dalits are treated in India as sub human beings and are given the most humiliating jobs, coincides with the black predicament in America to a considerable degree. One can discern that the system of untouchability and low social status given to Dalits impose a double burden on them as on the Africans in America. The protagonist of the two novels – Sethe

of *Beloved* and Seetaravudu of *Yajnam* are placed almost in the same predicament. Both of them escape from the cauldron of slavery almost in similar situations. Sethe murders her daughter Beloved, preferring death to bonded labor. Showing the headless body of his son to his father Seetaravudu says why he prefers death to “Kambaritanam” (bonded Labor) for his son. : I have great love for my son. He should not live like a slave. My son is not a “Kambari”. Thus both Morrison’s Sethe and Rama Rao’s Seetaravudu are held up in an escapable psychic state which is the outcome their social economic oppression.

Morrison’s work is always symbolic of the shared human condition, both engaging with and transcending lines of race, gender and class. The novels of Morrison do more than inform us of what kind of life or lives black people in America lead. What they seek to do is to make us see experiences from the black perspective. In her novels, plot, character, action and language convey, through a circular development, not only the way black folk live, but a way for anyone to live. Her novels are critiques of being and as such suggest strategies for survival in a world where the individual confronts tangible, immediate threats as well as impersonal and abstract hazards.

Through her novels, Toni Morrison presents the non-linear African-American socio-historical reality. Her novels show the victimization of black people within the context of a racist social order. In one of her interviews she says: “*I don't want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. It is the complexity of how people behave under white duress that is of interest to me.*”

About her art she says;

*“If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write), isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams - which is to say yes, the work must be political...It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the sametime.”*

In her novels there is a move from the particular to the general and it can be said that the black women’s discourse has the potentiality to address not only the issues related to the subjugated life world of the black women but also those of the subalterns in general. Morrison breaks the stereotype of the voiceless and the oppressed women who cannot protest. The three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye* are hardcore prostitutes, not ‘the understanding and sensitive kind’. “...these women hate men, all men without shame, apology or discrimination...”. In contrast to the efforts of Pauline and Pecola to separate themselves from the heritage, they seem to have an understanding that their lives have value. They tell Pecola that no matter how much they are despised by others, their lives have meaning because these women define themselves rather than relying on the judgements of outsiders. They make no pretensions about being anything other than “whores in whores’ clothing” and thus provide Pecola with a contrast to her mother, who tries to change who she is in order to fit white society’s diktats. Claudia, the young protagonist, hates “old squint-eyed Shirley Temple”. She hates “all the Shirley Temples of the world”. she does not feel comfortable sleeping with the “hard unyielding limbs” of such a doll. She would rather break or tear it into pieces. She is very critical about the white society and can snub them whenever the need arises. In Morrison’s second novel *Sula*, Sula Mac Peace is a “living criticism of the dreadful lives of resignation other women live”. She rejects “behavioral standards of all

kinds” and attempts to “rely solely on herself”. Jadine in *Tar Baby* is the picture of a liberated African-American woman. She refuses to choose between the apparent opposites offered to her, or to internalize an external image- either black or white- as definition of self. “I belong to myself,” Jadine tells Son, and she becomes most outraged at him when he tries to impose a dualistic definition of her.

Morrison’s intention through her writing is to reinterpret and redefine the hidden, dislocated and alienated AfroAmerican presence in American mainstream discourse and claim that AfroAmericans are no more inferior human beings. Black lore, black music, their language and all the myths and rituals of Black culture are the most prominent elements in Toni Morrison’s writing. She feels a strong connection to her ancestors and thinks it is the responsibility of Afro- American writers to dig out that annihilated history and secure the importance of it in the making of American civilization.

Exploring the complexity of black female experience in white America, Morrison attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in her African-American identity. Conscious of her own marginalization within the context of the mainstream, she starts valuing her peripheral existence. As a ‘Black Woman Writer’, Morrison claims to be concerned, above all, with the idea of a ‘black community’- what such a community once meant, how it has changed, and how despite those changes, it is and should be maintained. In an interview with Salman Rushdie, she says, “I am not sure what the word ‘Negro’ means, which is why I write books. What is a black child/ woman/friend/mother. What is a black person. It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an African-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions.”

Naturally her novels are the exploration of the meaning of blackness- what it means to black in white America, to be a black woman in a white male hegemonic society, to believe in an indigenous African culture. Her novels record the triumph and complexities of black life from the painful past of slavery to the frustrating, racist present. Morrison talks of her writing as “archaeological explorations” one of her major concerns being the rewriting of African-American history from a black female perspective.

Historical experiences of black African-Americans are used as a background in almost all the novels of Toni Morrison. In *Beloved* woman is under the burden of patriarchy and slavery while in *Sula* characters have a disparity in the personality. They are trying to manifest the subjective consciousness by struggling hard to cope with their free self. As Sethe points out, “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another”. *Beloved* represents inter-relatedness among the individual identity and the communal identity of the blacks. The novel in its vivid portrayal of the Negro community, complete with their desire and troubles, shows that a coloured man is like any man. *Beloved* addresses the concern of whether it is better to endure the injustices of an unfeeling people or to fight against them. Her novels bring much of the American experience out of the marginal shadows and give American literature as a whole a more complete and finer dimension.

As a novelist artistically dealing with racism and sexism as sources of oppression of black women in white America, Toni Morrison reminds us of Anita Desai, a distinguished contemporary Indian woman novelist in English, who sensitively presents female alienation and oppression in the post-colonial Indian society. Like Toni Morrison, Anita Desai deals with the world of lonesome and sensitive heroines - Maya, Monisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul - who are pitted against the dehumanizing forces abroad in Indian society. When these heroines seek a

higher communion of free spirits, they are compelled to conform and yet are denied even the ordinary comforts in marriage and motherhood. The compulsion to succeed in conformity leads with to despise themselves as in the case of Toni Morrison's heroines like Pecola, Sula and Jadine. Anita Desai's heroines are a study of female psyche alienated owing to a lack of compassionate companionship. Their predicament is all the more touching as these female protagonists long for the human touch, sensitivity and companionship of their husbands. Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* is haunted by the Albino's reading of her horoscope and prophesied an early death of one of the partners. She reflects on her husband's non attachment when she fervently longs for his affection. Right from the beginning she intuitively feels that her husband "knew nothing that concerned me". Monisha in *Voices in the City* is a sensitive young woman who falls a prey to her monitoring in-laws. Her sister, Amala, is a painter who learns the survival techniques like Claudia and Freida, the MacTeer sisters in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is a charismatic personality who suffers at the hands of her businessman-like husband, Raman. She does not want her child to be born into the chaotic, insensitive world where new life will be jeopardized. Sita invariably reminds us of Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved*. Nandu Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* suffers lifelong negligence at the hands of her Vice Chancellor husband. Thus, in the fiction of both Morrison and Anita Desai, the crucial issues of female alienation and oppression are authentically mirrored and artistically expressed.

Morrison's ultimate message is that no longer should African people be physically intimidated by Europeans as in *The Bluest Eye*, no longer should African people ignore their duty to pass on the knowledge of their history as in *Song of Solomon*, and no longer should African people attempt to wage struggle alone and, thus unsuccessfully as in *Tar Baby*. Solidarity, the theme of *Beloved*, is the answer for African people.

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