

DEGRADATION OF HUMAN VALUES AS OBSERVED IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE* AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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Abstract

Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the most prominent female writers in the African American literature expose the same dilemma of blacks' suffering and humiliation. They have some similarity in their portrayal of the race, gender and class exploitation in the respected society. Morrison highlights racial discrimination in her most celebrated novel *The Bluest Eye* whereas Walker depicts gender discrimination in her mostly acclaimed novel *The Color Purple*. The present research paper probes into the world of the African Americans particularly studying Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Walker's *The Color Purple*. The attempt of this paper is to show the similarity in the work of the respected novelists with taking into consideration the theme of degradation of human values.

Keywords: human values,exploitation,humiliation,equality,racism,sexism etc.

Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker share the similar reality of the African Americans in general and African American women in particular. Though the female characters portrayed by them are suffered, humiliated and exploited they become central in the novels. As G. Baskaran rightly observes about them: "They project their vision of the world, society, community, family, their lovers, even themselves most often through their female characters' eyes and personae." (359) Morrison novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) poignantly attacks upon the horrible effects of the racial ideology in white racist America. It delineates racial, gender and class exploitation of the blacks in general and black women in particular. Whereas Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) shows the victimization of women on the account of gender. The novel mainly focuses

upon the gender marginalization due to the male patriarchy. The main question arises that why the whites in the novel *The Bluest Eye* considers Pecola, a girl child in the novel as ugly. When she goes to the shopkeeper to buy some candies the shopkeeper just disrespect her. As the novelist writes: "He does not see her because for him there is nothing to see." (36) It shows the value system of the white American society that considers the blacks inferior. The blacks are exploited and humiliated on the account of their colour. The whites don't have any moral justification behind their act. It shows the degradation of human values in the society where one member is considered inferior than the other. There are many incidents in the novel which show the degradation of the human values in the African American society. Pecola Breedlove, a black girl child is humiliated and exploited not only at the society by whites but also at home by the family members. At home she is a neglected individual and doesn't have freedom like her brother Sammy. Her mother Pauline showers all her love upon the children of white employer and doesn't care about Pecola at all. Cholly her father, an embodiment of patriarchy puts the family 'outdoors'. So Pecola goes to live with The MacTeers family. Claudia, one of the members from the Mac Teer family, who is a narrator of the novel narrates the tragedy of the blacks' life in racist America. As she narrates: "Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was, something we had learned to deal with-probably because it was abstract." (11) It shows the reality in the lives of the blacks. Being black they live a marginal existence. The Breedloves status in the society is a lower one. As blacks they are helpless and vulnerable. Claudia narrates about their living: "There were no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl, inaccessible to the eye, if not the ear, of the tenants." (25) They live in such a situation because they are blacks. Being black Pecola is racially discriminated by black boys too. A group of boys torments her by chanting about her Blackness and her father's supposed habit of sleeping naked. They harass her daily saying: "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo..." (50) The harassment of Pecola by Black boys is nothing but self-hatred which had been burned for ages in the hallows of their mind. Her encounter with the young Mulatto girl, Maureen Peal, who is her school mate is extremely full of disgusting. She humiliates and attacks Pecola, Frieda and Claudia and says, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly. Black e mos. I am cute!" (56) Maureen Peal considers herself as superior than Pecola so she teases Pecola.

Miss Geraldine also considering Pecola ugly and humiliates her. Pecola's father Cholly too is seen as victim of this age-old ideology of racism and once he is humiliated by two white men when he was making love with one country girl. As a black man he is seen as unsuccessful who has to live life in a very lower conditions. He is unable to fulfill basic requirements of the family. Therefore there is a tussle between him and his wife Pauline. Pauline, being helpless due to her husband's male domination becomes a victim of domestic violence. She finds work at one white employer in order to fulfill the basic needs of the family. Here it is seen that only because of the racial ideology of the whites the blacks are suffered throughout their life. Pecola, Pauline and Cholly are the victims of the racism as well as classism. Since they are poor and ugly they live in a very poor condition. As Morrison writes about their living:

Like a sore tooth that is not content to throb in isolation, but must diffuse its own pain to other parts of the body-making breathing difficult, vision

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limited, nerves unsettled, so a hated piece of furniture produces a fretful malaise that asserts itself throughout the house and limits the delight of things not related to it. (27)

The Breedloves go through the different experiences as blacks. The above lines show the lower status of the blacks. This is the degradation of human values in America that is responsible for the oppression and humiliation of the blacks in *The Bluest Eye*. Cholly as a young man experiences the horror of racism. When he was enjoying sex with one country girl two white men humiliated him. This experience loses his faith to survive in the racial atmosphere of the African American society. “ I said, get on with it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good.” (116) The whites considered the blacks lower than them and they tried to show their supremacy over the blacks. This scene proves this fact. The most pathetic situation occurs in the novel when Cholly rapes his own daughter Pecola. What is the reason behind Cholly’s inhuman act? The answer to this question is simple that is the degradation of the human values of love, compassion, and pity. Cholly who himself is a victim of the age-old ideology of racism never understands the feelings of her wife Pauline and daughter Pecola. Later in the novel Pecola in order to acquire, white standard of beauty yearns for the blue eyes. But her attempts give her nothing but sorrows. She approaches one man namely Soaphead Church who is actually a falsehood. He just deceives people in order to earn money. Pecola is seen as a victim of his wrong practices. He just wants to get rid of one dog he detests. Therefore he takes help from Pecola telling her that she has to just feed the dog that was sleeping in the porch. He says : “ if nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one.” (139). Pecola gives the food to the dog and in the first bite the dog dies. Pecola becomes very happy seeing the dead dog. She considers that her wish of the blue eyes has been granted. Actually she becomes mad and the writer wants to narrate through her madness that the desire of getting white standard of beauty is just an illusion for the black girls like Pecola. At last Pecola dies in the novel in her madness. So Morrison has shown in her novel *The Bluest Eye* the degradation of human values and its horrible effects upon the members of the society. As Kavita Arya writes about the novel : “ The story-desire of an African American girl for a pair of blue eyes-is a symbolic statement about the conflict between the societal values of the Anglo-American and the Afro-American cultures. It also reflects the effect on the psyche of the people within those cultures.” (29) The tragedy of Pecola as well as her family occur because of the false belief system in the racist American society. The belief that creates barriers in the two communities that is black and white. The white society developed this belief of white standard of beauty, which is a type of degradation of human values. It makes the one group superior and another weaker. At the same time it is a big obstacle in the way of the blacks. As K. Sumana asserts “The belief that the black was not valuable or beautiful was, however, one of the cultural hindrances to black people throughout their history in America.” (118) If the white people had maintained the human values of love, compassion and pity Pecola as well as her parents’ fate would have been different.

In Walker’s *The Color Purple* too black women are doubly jeopardized and oppressed by male patriarchy and racism. They are unsafe not only at home but also in the society at home they become the victims of male domination and outside home of racial discrimination. As Seema Murugan rightly asserts: Walker’s fiction depicts vividly the institution of slavery and the conditions or environment it had set up.” (28-29) Similarly like *The Bluest Eye* Walker’s *The*

Color Purple shows the degradation of human values. Similarly like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* Celie the female protagonist of *The Color Purple* is humiliated, exploited and marginalized not only at home but also by the other members in the society. The novel opens on the note of the protagonist Celie's rape by her father Alphonso. Alphonso's wife is already feeling sick because of the recent child birth. Instead of that Alphonso demands sex from her. When she says no to him he finds a better option in his daughter, Celie. He is an embodiment of patriarchy and exploits Celie He says: You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't." (3) Celie's rape by Alphonso is one of the most pathetic incidents in the novel. It shows the degradation of human values in the society where a girl is humiliated, exploited and raped by her stepfather. Both Morrison's Pecola and Walker's Celie are the rape victims by their own fathers. As Celie narrates her sufferings in her very first letter to God: "Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside mu pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it." (3) Celie's stepfather impregnates Celie twice and sends her children away from her. As B. Kathiresan writes about Celie's sufferings: "Her stepfather Alphonso abused her and fathered her two children. She was abused, beaten, and treated as a slave. For Celie, motherhood was profoundly a negative experience." (371) Why does Alphonso behave in so much cruelty? Why does he rape his daughter? The answer of these questions is the same that is the degradation of human values. Due to the lack of love Alphonso behaves in such a way. Later the other character Albert with whom Celie gets married behaves in the same way. Actually, he wanted to marry Celie's daughter Nettie but anyhow he adjusts with Celie considering her a suitable one with his house-hold work. The novel shows Celie's victimization on the account of gender. She is suffered and humiliated due to the male patriarchy in the society. Both Alphonso and Albert don't understand women's feeling and so they become inhuman towards them which is the degradation of human values of love, compassion and pity. Like Celie there are other women who are treated badly and became victims due the degradation of human values. Sofia, Shug and Nettie are also suffered. Sofia is badly treated by her husband Harpo. She does not accept his male domination and so there is quarrel between them. They both fight with each other. As the narrator writes: "They fight like two men." (37) Later Sofia becomes a victim of racism when she reacts boldly to one white mayor. As a result to take revenge against Sofia the mayor tells the police to take third degree upon her. The people in the community too do not accept Shug. Her fault is nothing but she wants to live life in her own way and becomes a blues singer. Nettie has to leave home due to the abuse of her father Alphonso. One another character Squeak is also a victim of racial discrimination in the novel and she is raped by her uncle. It is very important to mention about the racial discrimination of Celie's real father who was a merchant but his rivals killed him considering him as a threat in their business. Thus not only females but also males are humiliated, exploited due to the age-old customs and norms in the society which is a result of degradation of human values. If the whites had not killed Celie's father then her fate would have been different. If Alphonso had treated her step daughter Celie with love and care following the human values then she would have not been a victim at the hand of Albert. If Harpo had taken care of his wife Sofia following the human values she would have not been treated badly by the white mayor. So both of the novelists Toni Morrison as well as Alice Walker show the victimization of blacks in general and women in particular due to the degradation of human values. So they want to establish a society where human values of love, compassion and pity will be followed and everyone either male or female; either black or white

will be treated equally. They crave for the society where everyone will get the freedom of expression and the life will be full of self-respect and dignity. This type of society is possible to establish when no one oppresses, humiliates and exploits the fellow being and respects the human values of love, freedom and equality.

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