
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, RACISM AND TRIPLE OPPRESSION

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Abstract

African American women have been made multiple victims: racial discrimination by the white community and sexual repression by black males of their own community. They have been subjected to both kind of discrimination - racism and sexism. It is common experience of black American women. Black American women do have their own peculiar world and experiences unlike any white or black men and white women. They have to fight not only against white patriarchy and white women's racism but also against sexism of black men within their own race. To be black and female is to suffer from the triple oppression- sexism, racism and classicism.

Alice Walker and her Common Theme:

Alice Walker, a powerful black female writer, writes about the complex themes of racial injustice and the oppression over women. She portrays the struggle of black people especially of black women throughout history. Since, she examines closely the experiences of black women in a sexist and racist society in her fiction works, she is called the voice of the voiceless people, usually of the poor black women. "Her personal experiences and observations as a black woman are replicated in her works and her characters" (Charrumathi viii). She admires the struggle and achievements of black women throughout the western history and particularly American history to maintain selfhood, spirituality and creativity in their lives. Her literary works pave the way for black and even white women for attainment of emotional wholeness. She raises the issue of triple oppression of racism, sexism and classicism on black women. It is common theme in her fiction works. Her female characters are capable of confronting and resisting repressions caused by different agents of patriarchal society. They build a unity in female circle to resist such patriarchal repressions. They articulate clear visions not just of the repressions they face, but of the hope to develop the ability to stand up for themselves in acts of resistance.

Racism and Repression

Racism, a systematized form of oppression, is prejudicial attitude existing between races for thousands of years. Racism in America has existed since the colonial era. It involves laws, practices and action that discriminate and impact various groups based on their race and ethnicity. Whites in America enjoyed legally and socially sanctioned privileges and rights which were denied to other races and minorities.

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Racism, as a man-made phenomenon, has been defined by Hernton Calvin as:

all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group; whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group behaviour and emotions that compel one group to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if, it did not belong to the human race. (Calvin 175)

The basic myth of racism is that white skin by birth carries its cultural superiority, that the whites are more intelligent and more virtuous than the blacks by the simple fact of being white in color of skin. On the psychological level, whiteness is automatically associated with beauty and culture whereas blackness with ugliness and cultural backwardness and with the background of slavery.

Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought the first Africans in chains to use their labour in their farms. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. In a study of the origin of racism in the United States, Joel Kovel, about the whites, says "first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange" (Kovel 18). There was nothing left to blacks except their black African soul which was also taken away by super imposed white values on them. With the collapse of their native values, they lost their authentic self and began to cultivate the feelings of inferiority. Hence black men in America do have the bitter experience of racism as they have suffered much from racism for being black.

Black women, being dependent on black males, suffered more than their male members and became helpless. Being a slave himself, black man was completely unable to question the white man's misbehavior upon his woman. Either way, "the black woman was deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection" (Gerda xxiii). So, black women's awful predicament continued right from the days of slavery.

Despite gradual progress, black women in America are still far behind black men and white women. Gloria Steinem, in her introduction to *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, states this equation very briefly thus: "Just as male was universal but female was limited, white was universal but black was limited" (Steinem 7). A sense of inferiority and inadequacy was cultivated by the white dominant group to deprive blacks of their genuine potential.

Hence, the condition of black women from the right beginning of slavery has been being worse than black men in the new land America. They became the victim of racist and sexist oppression including lynching and rape. Black women are bearers of what Barbara Smith calls "geometric oppression" (Smith 5). They are bound to carry a triple consciousness- race, gender and class for not only being black but also being female and economically underprivileged in the male dominated society. This triple oppression has blocked black women from flourishing their hidden potentiality and to make a notable involvement in the society. Oppressed from black men in their patriarchal community and white men and women in society, black women have to struggle for survival both inside and outside their houses. They have been resisting the multiple repressions of different forms in different ways. They are uniquely rich in resisting repressions. This can be meaningfully witnessed in the literary works especially in fiction works of Alice Walker, the richly deserving recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1982.

Walker's novels highlight black women, differentiated not only in terms of male standard and poverty but also more importantly Euro-American women's standard. In her novels, the black woman is understood in contrast to the white woman. By nature of their race, black women are considered as lower class, as Barbara Christian in her book, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, remarks:

They had to work, most could not be ornamental or withdrawn from the world; and according to the aesthetics of this country, they were not beautiful. But neither were they men. Any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part, qualities necessary for participation in the work world, were constructed as unwomanly and tasteless. (Christian 72)

Black American women are considered totally different from other women not only in color of skin but also in mental aptitude. They were thought neither beautiful in body nor average in mental capacity and were taken as unwomanly and tasteless female sex.

Walker studies the overall condition of black women and questions the social convention of mainstream society dominated by the whites in America. She prefers womanism rather than feminism to make the close study of the actual inner and outer goings of African American women's life. She lays an emphasis on female solidarity to fight against whites' racism and black males' sexism. She examines black women's quest for selfhood through individual relationship to the community. Her female characters are on search of psychological health and wholeness and eventually achieve it when they become able to fight against oppression. They embody the struggle of being a triple minority- both black and female. One finds Walker unfolding the oppression of black women in her fiction works. In other words, Walker's fiction works depict the emotional, spiritual and physical devastation that occur when family trust is betrayed. Her focus is on black women who grow to reside in a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identity beyond male domination.

Walker is sensitive to the racial undercurrents of American society. As a militant black woman writer engaged in liberation struggle, she strongly states that the major concern of black women's literature should be on black women's struggle for self definition. It should encourage black women to struggle against the racial or sexual oppression upon them in male dominated society. In an interview granted to Sojourner, Walker herself states:

Of course the [whites] oppress us; they oppress the world. Who's got his big white foot on the whole world? The white man, the rich white man. But we also oppress each other and we oppress ourselves. I think that one of the traditions we have in Black Women's literature is a tradition of trying to fight all the oppression. (Walker 14)

Walker opines that the major concern of black women's literature should be on oppressions of different kinds imposed upon black women not only by White men and women but also by the men of their own race and communities. Black women's literature should aim at encouraging black American women to resist the repression of different kinds from different sides.

It can be argued that in a multiracial society like the United States, the dominant race uses its power to dictate the existential modalities of the minority races. Even blacks would want to borrow the external signs of whiteness by bleaching their skin or by wearing colored contact lenses in order to move closer to white phenotypes. In reference to social dynamism of African American society, Walker in Sojourner further adds, "They [Black men] never examine their

relationship to Black women and rarely to black children. Because their whole thing is to be manly. Not only to be men but to be white men. Their whole number is to be white men"(13). Barbara Christian examines and foregrounds the theme of regeneration within the political purpose of Walker's works. In relation to black people's desire for regeneration in Walker's novels, Christian adds:

Walker sorts out the throwaways, the seemingly insignificant and hidden pieces of the lives of Southerners, particularly black families. . . . Her novels continually stitch a fabric of the everyday violence that is committed against her characters and that they commit upon one another in their search for regeneration, and regeneration is what they as black people desire. (Christian 180-81)

Walker's novels catch up the sufferings and triple oppressions that black women have to face in their everyday life and also present oppositions which exist between and within the constructions of white and black female subjectivity.

Triple Oppression and Racism

A prolific writer Afro-American writer, Walker closely examines the ways in which the world around black women has deeply affected their physical and emotional being. Her major concern in her writing is about white and black men's oppression upon black women and their attempt to resist it in the society governed by racism, sexism and patriarchy. She addresses the very difficult and unspoken issues of black women, their strength, experiences and womanhood. She urges her women to break the silence.

African American women have been made victim of racial discrimination by the white community and sexual repression by black males of their own community. They have been made prey of both racism and sexism. It is common experience of black women in America. Afro-American women do have their own peculiar world and experiences unlike any white or black men and white women. Roby Ward and Diane Price Herndl also remark, "Black women are doubly marginalized" (Ward and Herndl 741). They have to fight not only against white patriarchy and white women's racism but also against sexism of black men within their own race. So, to be black and female is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender bias. Being black, the African women suffer from racism; being females they are the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the black male. Being former slaves, black people are forced to live on scarce resources and are compelled to remain poor. Needless to say, black women are under financial scarcity within the black community due to gender difference. They are confined to the lowest-paying jobs and made less than half of what white women made. They are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways than white women.

In other words, the black women in America are made victims of triple jeopardy- racism, sexism, and classicism. This triple burden has restricted black women from being full human beings to render meaningful participation in society. Suffering at the hands of both black and white men, the American black women have to fight for survival both inside and outside their houses. Walker sees American black women carrying triple consciousness and deals with this theme in her fiction works. Through her female characters in the novel, she stresses on the fact that, since the black

women suffers double or even triples repression, they do have hidden potentiality to regain their lost selfhood and subjectivity and rightful place in their racist and sexist society.

Conclusion

African American women have been the victim of racist and sexist oppression for long time. Being black in color of skin, female in gender and economically underprivileged in male dominated society, African American women have been carrying triple consciousness. Despite this triple oppression, they have been resisting the repressions of different kinds and searching for their identity. Oppressed from black men and white men and women, African American women are in persistent struggle to render meaningful participation and contribution in their society. Black men in America also do have the pungent experience of racism for being black and former slave of whites. However, being dependent on black males, a black woman suffers more than her male partner because her man remains helpless even to question a white man's misbehavior upon his woman. Since, black men have been victim of racism; black women have been victim of racism, sexism and classicism. Alice Walker, in her novels, mostly speaks about the triple repressions on black American women as they are female in sex and black in color of skin and economically weak women in male dominated society.

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