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## SUPPRESSION TO SELF-ASSERTION: MAPPING THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON AND ALICE WALKER

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**Abstract:** For centuries, women have been subject to gross injustice and discrimination, no matter what the color of their skin might be. But the sufferings of the afro-american women have been unique, as they are victimized by men of their own community, white men and white women – thus depriving them of a dignified and respectful life. This paper tries to examine how the female protagonists of the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, in spite of belonging to a suppressed community, negotiate their way through life, by sheer grit and determination, and how they progress from a state of suppression to that of self-assertion. This paper also tries to examine the factors that make this progression possible, in spite of living within the limited space that these women have.

**Keywords:** Afro-American women, identity, self, self-assertion, slavery, suppression.

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**Introduction:** In examining the social and political context out of which the Afro-American self evolved, it is important to note that in its most essential aspect, slavery did not differ much from the ‘formal freedoms’ that were granted to black people in the United States. In reality, slavery and its aftermath represented a system of organized and sustained violence, psychic and otherwise, against a subject people. While slavery enslaved the whole person, imperialism under the illusion of granting full freedom to the individual, stole the labor of Afro-Americans just as savagely, and limited their participation in the social and political affairs of the country to a minimal and peripheral degree. The major crime of the dominant white society resides in its attempts to reduce all Negroes to a sense of impotence and nothingness. This is the internal ‘rust’ that threatens the development of the personal identity of all black people in America. As a result, the entire social development of Afro-Americans has been conditioned by their struggle to liberate themselves from the crippling social and psychological effects of the dominant ideology and culture. To a larger degree, this struggle manifested in the literature of Afro-American people, particularly in the autobiography. Since literature examines the manner in which ideas, values and feelings function within the social totality, it is in these autobiographical statements that we begin to understand the manner in which the Afro-American person [self] evolved. For Afro-American women, the violence, violation and degradation possessed its own peculiarities and that superadded to the burden common to all, they had wrongs, sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own.

In spite of this violence, violation and degradation, the Afro-American women remained largely ignored and seldom discussed publicly. Her condition remained a closely guarded secret and few of the

thousands of autobiographies that were published in the early years were concerned with her condition. This absence continued well into the contemporary era, leading to a situation in which one could speak about the autobiographical statement in Afro-American literature without really having to confront the Afro-American woman as black and as female; as a person and as a presence; as autonomous and as responsible. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are classic examples of writers who have created female characters who defy all traditional norms of womanhood. It is said that society can hinder as well as further a man’s healthy development. But what is more important is to know, to what degree and in what directions their positive and negative influences are exercised. These novelists through their characters explore how the wounded psyche, affects human behaviour in different ways. In some people it causes insanity, destructiveness and anarchy, while, in some, it breeds sanity, balance and constructive behaviour. Whether it breeds positive or negative behaviour in persons, depends on the specific temperament of the person on whom it works. That the same psychic state formed by the same wretchedness of society gives rise to different qualities in different individuals and how some succumb to the social pressures around and disintegrate, where as others boldly sail through the obstacles in life, by redefining their ‘selves’ is proved through the writings of these novelists. Their writings clearly demonstrate the role that black literature has played in countering negative representations of black people and in promoting black consciousness. Blackness, for them becomes the symbol of radical dissidence which embraces both a state of female consciousness as well as radical identity, which lies beyond the laws of patriarchy.

**The ‘Self’ Of Women:** The identity of an individual evolves through a process of development. Various

factors-like the environment at home when the child is growing up, the social, cultural and political milieu around –all contribute to the growth of a healthy or unhealthy ‘self’ within the individual. The ‘self’ of an individual, be it man or woman, is socially constructed through interaction with others, traits of which the child internalizes as part of its growing up. The female experience widely differs from that of the male in many ways. Social practices and state institutions are all marked by gender distinctions, wherein women are assumed to be naturally inferior. These experiences vary from culture to culture. Thus, it is under conditions of oppression and discrimination, unique to the afro –american culture, that the ‘self’ of these women get molded. Women in that world were alienated individuals who could not change their social condition and felt only a sense of individual failure. They were depicted as existing at the surface level of reality, mere appendages of black male life, never really seeming to live important lives worthy of emulation. Morrison and Walker, through their female protagonists, demonstrate how women with their innate strength and potential can elevate themselves from their suppressed state and progress towards creating an identity of their own, by redefining themselves. Their works depict the disintegration of the afro-american woman’s ‘self’ and the various mechanisms by which she can shape and redefine her ‘self’ in a healthy way and how she has succeeded in creating a new paradigm of self –assertion.

The manifestation of the self as an /other woman is an intermediary structure that Morrison and Walker use in their narrative articulation of a black woman’s willful selfish love for herself, an intermediary made necessary by the cultural and social imperatives against self-love, and the danger and daring that self-love is. Morrison and Walker also illustrate how the love of the other [girlfriend], gradually transforms into the love of the self, through an awareness of one’s potentials, leading to a self-centered identity as the subject moves between an identification with, and an identification as one’s real ‘self’. This model of Black female selfhood is revolutionary as it is a practice that is done counter to the intentions of social oppression. Also, it needs to be noted that the identification that generates from this love is powerful and self-reflexive, and not narcissistic. A woman is encouraged by her girlfriend to be herself and this ‘other’ to a black woman’s self, offers a rare opportunity for that black woman to be selfish.

[Quashie,189]

**Women In Toni Morrison’s Works:** Toni Morrison’s *THE BLUEST EYE* deals honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of black people.

Pecola, Cholly, Pauline and others suffer from confused social directives. The novel lays bare the victimization of black people within the context of a racist social order. We see how Pecola is forced to long for blue eyes like those of white children, so that she would be loved and accepted by both whites and blacks. Spoiled by the seductive tug of white standards and values and humiliated by the reality of white society, she finally goes mad. Being a minority in both caste and class, Pecola has been convinced of the superiority of white standards and values. She seems to know that the Breedloves are damaged people, undervalued by both whites and blacks. The sense of inferiority has come to the blacks from their being carried away by what is dictated by white people. Their sense of ugliness is also a part of it. Suffering from this sense of ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike, she had realized the need to get blue eyes. This is the starting point of her psychic disorder.. Due to the influence of white values, Pecola does not realize that the concept of physical beauty as a virtue, is one of the most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world. All that Pecola experiences is repeated rejection from her own people. Even more chillingly, her parents, never having experienced nurturing love, do not know how to love; they cannot give their children a sense of worth for they have none of their own. White standards have corrupted the minds of black people in such a way that they develop self hatred. Pecola symbolizes a woman who becomes a victim of her circumstances. The novel also demonstrates how the environment at home, and society at large, abets the gradual disintegration of the ‘self’.

Sula is in quest of her selfhood. She is therefore prepared to defy the rules, codes and customs which bring constraints on to her life and behaviour. She has experienced, heard and seen the sufferings of her mother and grandmother. Consequently, her rebelliousness manifests itself in several ways. Unlike other women of her community, Sula refuses to marry and raise a family. Morrison brings out the predominant traits of Sula’s personality by providing the readers with another character, Nel Wright. By examining the Nel-Sula relationship, Morrison seems to be looking into the concept of women bonding as a means of coming to an understanding of the self. In each other’s company they discover their consciousness. They begin to learn who they are and what they want to do individually and collectively. Sula seems to personify the image of a black woman who manages to chart her own course of life, overcoming insurmountable odds. She clearly demonstrates how the social, political and cultural milieu of her immediate surroundings, moulds her

personality and how in the end she emerges as a strong woman.

BELOVED is the story of Sethe- her life under slavery, the conception and care of her children in the most dire conditions, her escape and liberation and her desperately loving act of infanticide. As in most of her novels, the need for women to re-establish connections with one another is powerfully rendered in Morrison's *Beloved*. It was all the more important in that era of slavery because there was a profound and real need for physical as well as psychological survival. Like Sula, Sethe is an outlaw. Just as Sula is determined to 'make' herself, even at the risk of distancing herself from other black women and seeks to assert a sense of self, Sethe does not care for the community because she had no choice. Sethe's experiences in life, pushes her to the extreme act of infanticide, not wanting to see her child go through the same traumatic experiences that she had to negotiate in life. *Beloved* explores the aftermath of appalling hurts, the psychic as well as material damage inflicted by slavery. In consonance with psychoanalytic theory one can see that the psyche is constructed within a wide system of relationships, offering a model of how social, cultural and political forces become internalized. We see how selfhood is socially constructed through interaction with others, aspects of whom have been internalized by the child as part of itself. The clear workings of psychoanalytic theory can be seen in the character of *Beloved*, who is inscribed almost exclusively in terms of projection and introjection. The novel also demonstrates how each of the protagonists has experienced not only the material horrors of slavery but a psychic trauma which undermines their sense of self. Deprived of pre-oedipal bonding with mothers or caregivers, Denver, Sethe and Paul D have all proceeded from repressive isolation to a developed sense of self, reflected back from the love they see in the eyes of others.

**The Color Purple:** Alice Walker's history and heritage provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. Walker focuses on the element of *buildingroman*- the development of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. Her works are concerned with racial, political, sexual and moral issues particularly with the Afro-American women's struggle for survival. Walker prefers womanism to feminism because it sounds stronger and more exclusive. Walker uses this term to express the distinctive black and female experience. Almost all of Walker's female characters go through catastrophic events in their life, before they embrace womanism. To aid the black woman in her struggle for survival, the black women writers need to discover a matriarchal link with her past, her racial

female ancestor. What is striking about the female characters in Walker's fiction is their struggle to survive for a dignified life, in spite of the social conditions that they are in.

Alice Walker's *THE COLOR PURPLE* traces the liberation of the Afro-American woman and tries to demonstrate how bonding between women could go a long way in ameliorating their sufferings. The novel principally centers on the struggles of four Black women to liberate themselves from the clutches of a hostile society. The narration progresses through the voice of Celie, who writes to God, and later to her sister Nettie. This is the only way that she can share her secrets: being raped by her father, watching her mother's death without being able to tell her of her victimization, protecting her sister from incest and rape, bearing the brunt of everyone's contempt and pity, most particularly Pa's and her new husband's Mr.--, who saw her as no more than a beast of burden. The novel is a vivid account of domination and oppression heaped upon women, who become mere toys in the hands of the men folk. Celie's experiences are so degrading that she cannot admit them to anyone but to God. Like all other women in Walker's fictions, Celie has the ability to cope because of the inherent strength and resilience that she possesses.

To regain her self esteem, Celie has to overcome her sexual revulsion and love her own self. This is made possible by Shug. The repossession of her body helps Celie in regaining her speech, which she seemed to be deprived of in the beginning, by her stepfather. Her recovered self-esteem awakens her lost desires and this in turn makes her aware of the problems in her current life with Albert. Celie's life clearly demonstrates how until the doors leading to the self remain bolted for ever, until one finds one's own voice. Her decision to leave Albert, is a mark of her self-respect. From then on, her letters are no longer addressed to God, but to her sister, Nettie."Celie learns to connect herself with a flesh and blood human being and this transition from a 'no body' God to a 'concrete body', Nettie, is important in her struggle for self-discovery." [1] Shug's act of returning Nettie's letters to Celie makes it possible for Celie to repossess her lost self. The various relationships that she forms during the course of her life also helps her in becoming independent. Her aroused self-esteem finally allows her to overcome her dependence on Albert and equips her with the ability to manage her life on her own.

Walker, through this novel, tries to demonstrate that unless women generate relationships among themselves and create their own community, they would be unable to withstand the onslaught of sexism raised against them by men. Thus, Walker's

womanism serves as a torchbearer to the black woman's search for selfhood. Experiences in the maternal home and nurturing that happens there, also play an important role in shaping the subjectivity of a woman.. Deprived of the love and care of a care giver, victim of sexual abuse by her own father, the trauma that Celie undergoes and the determination with which she puts her shredded life together, after her bonding with Nettie, once again reinforces the fact that selfhood is socially constructed.

**Conclusion:** These characters demonstrate how the 'self' can be molded and adapted as per the changing circumstances and situations. The awareness of their 'self' and its potential, strengthens these women and helps them in developing a high self esteem. This has also given them the strength to withstand social adversities. It becomes quite obvious that a woman has to struggle to achieve those very same things, which come easily on a platter for a man. Hence it becomes essential that women carve their own destiny, by eliminating those factors [physical and emotional] that act as impediments to their very survival. This process of elimination, needs to be done with utmost discretion by the individualistic female, taking into consideration the various factors, that contribute to the growth of a healthy 'self' and applying it, pertaining to specific contexts, situations and requirements. Women like Celie, Sethe, Beloved

and Sula, strive towards affirmation , empowerment and self -assertion , once they become aware of their self - worth.

A change in the stereotyped mindset of men also, could go a long way in helping women sail smoothly through the ups and downs of life, thus preventing a psychic disintegration. The men of this community show no understanding towards their womenfolk and are seen taking out their own frustrations on to their female counterparts. Another crucial factor is the understanding that there is a need for strong feminine bonding -could be in the form of a mother, sister, friend or child, so as to ameliorate the traumatic experiences that women undergo. The availability of such a person fulfills the need to be felt 'wanted' and the yearning to be 'loved'.

Beyond the societal constraints, what comes automatically to the afro-american woman, is being servile and submissive. The female characters in the works of Walker and Morrison loudly proclaim that self-assertion is possible, within the constraints of one's own community. What is required is not a new society that will accommodate women, but a release from the bounds and constrictions of a community that has prevented them from finding their individual identities, through self-awareness and by finding merit in the uniqueness of being a woman.

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