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## **A Comparative Study of Female Sexuality in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Meridian***

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**Abstract:** Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the significant female voices in the writing of African American literature showcase the different shades in the lives of the blacks in general and black women in particular. They expose the race, class and gender exploitation of the blacks in white dominated America. The present paper investigates into the theme of sexual overtones in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Both of the writers realistically depict humiliation and marginalization of the black women due to male patriarchy. The paper shows how both writers depict sexual elements in their novels. They have openly discussed the female sexuality in the novels, the issue which has not been discussed before in the tradition of African American literature.

**Keywords:** sexism, exploitation, racism, classism, sexuality.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the most notable female writers in the world of African American literature today discuss different issues like racism, sexism, classism and child abuse etc. They delineate the humiliation, exploitation and marginalization of the blacks in general and black women in particular. Kavita Arya writes about Morrison's writing: "Her novels focus on the realities of racial, sexual and capitalistic discrimination within the American context" (xii). On the

other hand, the inventor of the term 'Womanism' Alice Walker projects African American females as self-propagators of their own lives. As Gerri Bates observes about her writing, "Walker is adept in getting her characters to see possibilities and collective potential. Renewal – whether individual, community, or spiritual – becomes an integral component in the telling of Walker's stories" (20). There are some similarities as well as dissimilarities in their works. Both Morrison and Walker have handled the theme of sexism in their novels. Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, and Walker in *Meridian* show gender victimization. At the same time they want to expose female sexuality. Both belong to the African American literary tradition and try to enrich the fate of the blacks in general and black women in particular. Both of them show resistance of the black women to survive in the racist, classist and male supremacist society. As E. Demirturk writes about the literary tradition of African American women, "The African American women's novel presents the resistance of the black women to the denigrated images of black women" (Demirturk 1997). In these novels both Morrison and Walker have tried to highlight women's victimization on account of gender on one hand and give free treatment to sexual relationship of men and women on the other. They give full exposure to women's sexual instincts in these novels in order to highlight the need of sexual pleasure for women. The idea of individual freedom is the root of this depiction of female sexuality in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Meridian*.

*The Bluest Eye* (1970) opens with the horror of the pregnancy of Pecola, a female child which makes it clear that the novel has sexual overtones. Morrison attacks the male patriarchy which abuses the females sexually as well as mentally. The novel succinctly exposes the female sexuality. It shows how the women in general and black women in particular become the victims of male's sexual desire. Morrison has deliberately used sexual overtones, which exposes female sexuality in the novel. In the novel there are many incidents where the novelist uses the sexual depiction excessively. One of the minor characters Mr. Henry tries to molest Frieda, Pecola's friend. After the incident her sister Claudia just wants to know what happened to her. Claudia seems to be very curious about the incident. She wants to know how her sister

might have felt when Mr. Henry molested her. It shows the curiosity of the adolescent female children towards sex. This desire for sex gradually develops among the girls when they become women and it is very well reflected in the novel *The Bluest Eye* through Pauline as well in *Sula* through Sula, Eva, Hannah and Nel.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison depicts husband-wife relationship sensuously. There is depiction of love making between Cholly and his wife Pauline which reveals the sexual desire of a woman. Pauline is described prior meeting to Cholly as a woman who fantasizes about men. As the narrator writes: “Pauline was fifteen, still keeping house, but with less enthusiasm. Fantasies about men and love and touching were drawing her mind and hands away from her work” (88). Before marriage, she is portrayed as a woman who is eagerly waiting for a man to whom she wants to make love. Morrison, an excellent storyteller writes about the sexual pleasure a woman gets after enjoying sex with her husband in *The Bluest Eye*. As Pauline narrates about her lovemaking experience with her husband which is purely sensuous: “He puts his thing in me. In me. In me...I take my fingers out of his and put my hands on his behind. My legs drop back onto the bed. I don’t make no noise, because the chil’ren might hear. I begin to feel those little little bits of color floating up into me – deep in me. That streak of green from the june – bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs...” (101 ). The incident of love making scene between Cholly and one country girl also reveals the element of sexuality in the novel. Two white men try to humiliate Cholly: “Come on, coon. Faster. You ain’t doing nothing for her” (116). The most pathetic incident in the novel is when Cholly rapes his own daughter Pecola. Here also the narrator writes in a very different manner which arouses the libido while reading. The narrator writes, “Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg...and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear...” (128).

Similarly, Morrison's next novel *Sula* (1976) too follows the same element of sexual overtones. Here in this novel Morrison has used the sexuality at the centre of the novel. In the novel there are two families, Peace as well as Wright. The women from Peace family are totally engaged in love making. Sula's grandmother Eva is seen engaged with men and seeking pleasure in their company. As the novelist writes, "The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and laughter. The men wanted to see her lovely calf, that neat shoe, and watch the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distances in her eyes" (41).

Sula's mother Hannah too follows her mother Eva and indulges in sex. As The novelist writes: "Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and definite commitment. So she ended up a daylight lover, and it was only once actually that Sula came home from school and found her mother in the bed curled spoon in the arms of a man" (43-44). Hannah doesn't hesitate to make love with any man, any time at any place. She is projected by Morrison as a representative of a class of young black women who consider their sex pursuit as the only and ultimate goal of life. Like her mother Hannah Sula gradually develops a desire for males. The reason behind Sula's sex pursuit is to seek her own individuality in the society. Sayyed Mujahid writes about her: "She rejects traditional sexual modes as well, ignoring the 'ownership' principle of marriage and operating on the principle that sex is non-competitive and non-threatening" (85). The characters of Hannah and Sula project the idea of female sexuality in the novel. The sexuality which tries to make women stands against male patriarchy in the community. As Jayita Sengupta asserts about Hannah and Sula, "...a provider of sex like Hannah in Sula is universally disapproved of, but never seriously resented by the rest of the community. Hannah contributes to and partakes of the collective male pool while Sula uses Jude to fill a gap within herself" (131). Sula's relationship with her friend Nel's husband Jude also talks more about woman's sexuality. Nel sees them making love to each other. As

she narrates in the novel: “But they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all fours like ( uh, huh, go on , say it ) like dogs” (105). Sula enjoys sexual pleasure with different males in the novel. People from the community of Medallion do not accept Sula's behavior due to the sexual overtones in her behavior. She does not hesitate to sleep with Jude. Later she is engaged with one unemployed black youth, Ajax. Both enjoy sex. They are not genuinely involved in each other. They are just lustful in their behavior. Morrison gives a very subtle depiction of their sexual intercourse: “She put her head under his chin with no hope in the world of keeping anything at all at bay... He swallowed her mouth just as her thighs had swallowed his genitals, and the house was very, very quiet” (131). Sula gives full exposure to her sexuality in the novel. Morrison has shown Sula as a woman who breaks all the existed social norms for black women in the African American society. So people of the community condemn her. As the narrator writes: “They charge that Sula is guilty of the unforgivable thing...the route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men” (112). In both of these novels Morrison has given a different treatment to sex. She focuses how women are easy targets for men to gratify their sexual desire; at the same time she makes sexual gratification a necessary thing for women in both novels. Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula, Nel, Eva, Hannah in *Sula* are women who fulfill their sexual desire in the novel. It becomes their need.

Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) too discusses the issue of female sexuality like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. There are some similarities as well as dissimilarities in the depiction of female sexuality in the respected novels. Meridian, the protagonist in *Meridian* like Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula Hannah and Eva in *Sula* does not enjoy sex with her husband Eddie. She is seen ignorant about sex. As the novelist writes, “While not enjoying it at all, she had had sex as often as her lover wanted it, sometimes every single night. And since she had been told by someone that one's hips become broader after sex; she looked carefully in her mirror each morning before she caught the bus to school” (56). As an adolescent child, she does not have sufficient

knowledge about sex. Napolita Simanga observes about her, “Although she does become a mother, it is important to note that she is the victim of sexual violence and does not enjoy sex with her boyfriend” (51-52). She is observed as a neglected individual at home. Her mother does not provide any guidance to her about sex. The same case is in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Pecola is totally ignorant about her own body as a female. When her menstrual period comes for first time she becomes confused and it is only Mrs. Mac Teers who helped her. Pecola asked innocently to her friend Claudia: “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you” (23)? Sula is also ignorant about sex. But she is different from Pecola and Meridian. She considers sex as an easy play.

Meridian, like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, is seen as a victim of male patriarchy in the society where the females are exploited on account of gender. When Meridian is just an adolescent child she is seduced by a mulatto called George Dexter in the novel. In the novel there are some scenes boldly portrayed by Alice Walker with the purpose to show the victimization of women on account of their gender. In one episode of the novel Dexter tries sexual advancements on Meridian. The novelist writes: “Dexter had been after Meridian since she was twelve years old... He gave her candy for a swift exploratory feel. When she became older fifteen or so – he would take out his wallet crammed with money, and leave it on the sofa between them while he felt her breast and tried to pull her onto his lap” (62). In another episode the situation becomes more critical for Meridian where Dexter becomes more aggressive to seduce Meridian. As the novelist writes: “Holding her with back tight against him so that his penis was like a hard, live bedpost against her hips, he would whisper in her ear: ‘Think of how it would feel’, he would urge... he would press the bedpost against her”(63). For Dexter, Meridian is just an object of desire fulfillment. It shows women's position in the society and how they are the easy targets of men's sexual harassment. There is an incident in the novel where one assistant in the office seduces a girl. The scene shows women's sexual harassment and their victimization on the account of gender. As the narrator writes, “His hands were elsewhere. Already under the cardigan kneading the nipples – then into her pants as her skirt fell to the floor. Then he

hoisted her up onto the table..." (64). One white girl namely Lynne is raped by one black man called Tommy Odds. This incident also reflects women's sorrowful state in male dominated culture.

Meridian and Truman are observed as lovers in the novel. They both are civil rights activists and get involved with each other. Both of them like each other. The sexual scenes portrayed by Walker between Meridian and Truman makes it clear that Meridian is somewhat contented with Truman's love. Meridian a woman who was not interested while making love with her husband Eddie enjoys the company of her lover, Truman Hill. The novelist writes: "Indeed she felt and carefully noted it, as if the entire centre of her body was beginning to melt. She decided to click her mind off, and her body seemed to move into his of its own accord... they fucked, it seems for hours, and over and over again she nearly reached a climax only to lose it..." (117-118). But still Meridian does not feel completely satisfied with her own life. Her love for woman is 'purged'. It was not sexual. In the novel she is married and a mother of two children. At such stage of her life she felt love for Truman. But her love for Truman is completely different than that of Sula's love for Ajax and Jude. Morrison's Sula is defiant in nature. She gives full exposure to her sexuality. She does not believe in marriage and mothering and shattered the idea of motherhood saying her grandmother, Eva: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). But Walker's Meridian is a married woman. It is only after marriage that she understands the dark side of it which simply dooms women's freedom. So she takes a decision to leave her husband as well as a child. She participates in the Civil Rights movement in order to move ahead as well as to achieve new parameters in her life. The most notable difference in Morrison's Sula and Walker's Meridian is, Sula is unable to come out from the circle of sexuality that she has woven around her. She simply fulfills her sexual desire by sleeping with different men. But Meridian, being married and a mother of two children fulfills her sexual desire with having affair with Truman at the same time never forgets her social responsibility. She, being an active participant of the Civil Rights movement wants to dedicate her life for the noble cause. Meridian is actually seen disinterested in sex before meeting Truman. As the narrator writes for



her it seemed: “doubly unfair that after all her sexual experience and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex” (115). Walker's *Meridian* is completely different from Morrison's females like Pauline, Sula, Hannah, Eva and Nel who need the company of men. *Meridian* has given the new dimension to her sexuality. At last when Truman again proposes her she simply rejects his proposal. As Aziz Mohammadi and Kohzadi assert, “*Meridian*'s ‘pilgrimage’ cannot be complete until she transcends sexual, maternal, and racial categories through her participation in the revolution and her commitment to ‘recreate’ the world where black children may thrive without thorns of guilt” (2082). Morrison's Pauline, Sula, Hannah and Nel are the women who want the company of men for their own survival. Pauline does not want to leave Cholly when she is asked for the same by her white employer. Sula and Nel are also seen as victims of male patriarchy. Nel, being faithful to her husband Jude gets nothing but betrayal and Sula too is trapped in the treachery of Ajax's sexual lust. It is true that Pauline and Sula try their level best to survive in the male patriarchy. But at last Morrison's women are seen helpless and indulged in fulfilling their sexual instincts with men. However, Walker's *Meridian* is more creative than Morrison's females. She does not need men for her survival. She even rejects Truman's proposal. Alma S. Freeman observes this act of *Meridian* and says that she has to reject Truman “in an effort to get a hold of her own life” (39).

Pecola of *The Bluest Eye* and Wile Child of *Meridian* live on the fringes of the society. Pecola who is raped by her father Cholly becomes mad at last and dies a miserable death. Wile Child too, an adolescent girl like Pecola, is pregnant by unknown father. There are rumors about her in the town. As the narrator says, “It was four or five winters after they first spotted her that the neighbors noticed Wile Chile was pregnant. They were critical of the anonymous ‘low down dirty dog’ who had done the pregnating, but could not imagine what to do... the day *Meridian* saw Wild Child she withdrew to her room in the honors house for a long time. When the other students looked into her room they were surprised to see her lying like a corpse on the floor beside her bed, eyes closed and hands limp at her sides. While lying there she did not respond to anything; not the call to lunch, not the

phone, nothing (24). The lines show the vulnerable condition of a black girl child in the society. The girl child who doesn't have anyone to take care. Though it was noticed by some people about her pregnancy nobody takes care about her as well as about her child.

Thus, both Toni Morrison in her *The Bluest Eye* and Sula and Alice Walker in *Meridian* have done a successful attempt in portraying women's sexuality. They show how with love and tenderness women can feel the essence of sexual pleasure but on the contrary in the absence of it they become sexual objects to suffer under the burden of male's libidinous behavior from which there is no escape for them.

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