



The Strategy of Resistance in *Beloved*, *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT-

This research paper aims to explore the theme of resistance in three novels written by Toni Morrison, namely *Sula*, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. It will identify how the black female characters of these aforementioned novels are oppressed and marginalized and it further seeks analysis of how these characters channel their rationality and strength to undo their history of suppression. For black females, resistance emanates from the realization of their peripheral position and from the desire to transcend the inferior identity imposed upon them.

Keywords- Suppression, Domestic, Violence, Resistance And Marginalized

The exertion of power, exploitation and marginalization for a longer duration becomes a stimulating factor for resistance to oppression and dominance. The strong voice of dissent from the subaltern and marginalized forms the voice of resistance. Resistance is employed by non-hegemonic groups to dismantle the structures of dominance in society. Resistance attempts to recognize and identify all those marginalized and silenced voices that are peripheralized by the dominant structures. It demands the centralization of the marginalized sections by the confrontation of the dominant structures of the society. Various forces of domination that are often unjust and violent in their attitude results in the generation of violence. Resistance from the weaker sections is taken as a struggle to set free themselves from the class-caste consciousness that creates havoc on the oppressed sections of the nation. According to D. Miller in his book *Dominance and Resistance* (1989) "Resistance can be looked at as a matter for the enlarging and clarifying of human consciousness. Freedom is a matter of being able to 'see through' and to challenge the conditions that divert living subjects from a real understanding of the interest of their conditions of existence."

This study focuses on resistance not as, not as a violent and military form for the assertion of power but rather as a non-violent act undertaken for the assertion of their identities. It should not be perceived only as an act of opposition and refusal of power but could be read as an act of emancipation that emanates from the weaker section against the dominant structures. In an androcentric, society the asymmetrical power relation favours the dominant that resulting in the creation of resistance. Resistance allows individuals to carve out their own space by destabilization of existing social-cultural order to bring forth changes in society. These resistive acts may be collective or individual; they can be united or isolated resistances. Resistance by African-American people not only aims to undermine the hegemonic practices of the dominant structures but also desire to acquire their rightful due. For black people, resistance is not only rejection and negation of conventional norms and practices instead it is a movement towards their liberation and independence. Resistance becomes essential if the Blacks have to have their identities in the mainstream society. Toni Morrison provides an opportunity for the African-Americans to look at themselves from a lens different from the whites had presented in their works.

Toni Morrison juxtaposed the image of a white family of Jane and Dick Primer with that of Black families in *The Bluest Eye*. According to the first primer, the image of an ideal white family that remains unachievable for the Blacks has been symbolized through the example of Geraldines. Although it is the only Black family that could have attained the identity of an ideal family there is a dearth of happiness in it. Morrison in the reproduction of primer deliberately omits any kind of punctuation of marks to symbolize disorder in what could have been an orderly world. The next rendition of the primer is again presented without any punctuation marks which makes a breach of order in the Black family- here it is the Breedlove family-more evident. School primer has been employed by Morrison as a technique of resistance. She uses it to expose the false picture of the white world and also to make the readers face reality by challenging the status quo. Primer works in an ambiguous manner; one harsh reality is that Black man is tangled in two equally unapproachable worlds; one world consists of happy, ideal whites who do give any access to Blacks and the other world is that of Blacks which is all grim. The Breedlove family is situated in such a manner that neither they feel a part of the White world nor are they able to stay happy within their Black world.

By the use of a primer, the writer first establishes white supremacy and then with the use of techniques like removal of punctuation marks, absence of space between the words, she undercuts this very supremacy. A primer in hands of Morrison becomes completely unrecognizable and a

medium to expose the hollowness of white society. Justin Bailie in her book 'Contesting Ideologies: Deconstructing Racism in African-American fiction also posits a similar opinion-

"In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison offers a profound critique of codified and institutionalized White language and ideology through the subversion of a school primer that privileges Whiteness. Her project is to expose and revise the ideological deployment of language through a critique of education, culture, and religion, and in a rejection of exclusionary American discourse, Morrison instead privileges the language, idiom and cultural forms of the Black community. (24)

Morrison writes back using the very language of oppression, she alters and rejects any kind of hegemony of the language. So, primer is used not only to debunk the image of the perfect, ideal and white family that has been presented through the masters' narrative but also to provide an alternative to White hegemony through the reversion of the narrative strategy.

While primer opens *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* opens with a narration of events that tricked the Black people to settle in the hilly area of Medallion. The historical account of *Sula* in the opening chapters is set in the year 1919 and the novel closes in the year 1965, observation of all the changes which Black community goes through in this period presented through the character of Nel. The concluding chapters of this text present the narrative of resistance and the challenges that these people face due to industrialization.

Beloved covers the journey of a former slave Sethe, an actual event that inspired this slave narrative. It chronicles her pre-civil war life as a slave in the north to her escape to the free state of Ohio. It is not merely a story of wrong and violence; it also echoes the strength and resilience of an African-American slave who strives for the attainment of her freedom. Sethe not only fight but also becomes successful in the proclamation of her identity. She achieves it all through the means of resistance. Morrison also uses the technique of storytelling to put together fractured memory of Sethe's violent past.

The dynamics of race, gender and sexuality often put African-American women in the position to be victimized not only by Whites but also by people from their community. They bear the burden of the White as well as the Black male gaze. Violence is mostly used by the dominant section of the society to keep the other sections at the periphery but this equation gets inverted when violence is used by the suppressed groups to register their resistance. Resistance is used by these characters to abnegate the so-called superiority of the dominant group. The female characters of Morrison project varied forms of resistance and violence is one among them. In 'Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved* and *A Mercy*' author Amanda Putnam suggests

"Ranging in age from children to adolescents and adults, these female characters choose violence to find an escape – a disruption of the multifaceted oppression they have suffered within a White patriarchal society where Black women are tormented and subjugated by social and racial domination, exclusion and rejection. Their choices of violence – often rendered on those within their community or family – redirects that powerlessness and transforms it". (25-26)

In the public sphere, the use of violence as a tool of resistance revolves around doing away with the established power divisions and breaking the unjust dichotomies but in the domestic sphere, violence is used to attain power within the familial space. Morrison goes beyond the conventional image of home as a space that provides care, strength, courage and love instead it is presented as a site of resistance again. It becomes a location where the powerless are using violence to assert their individuality and to attain power over themselves. In this domestic space, Blacks are not the oppressed group instead it is a space where blacks are the subjects. This private space not only challenges the oppression of whites but also provides the Blacks with some reassurance and a site where they can reconstitute the respect which is disallowed to them publicly. This disparity between the spaces become more evident in *Sula* when Sula describes the home as a site of female domination with the Peace family as her focal point. The mother-daughter duo of Eva Peace and Hannah Peace provides the readers with an image where violence is employed for reassurance in the public sphere. Although this kind of violence according to Sula can result in emotional distancing among the individuals, however, is advantageous as "Eva bequeaths to Hannah, in turn, bequeaths to Sula, a capacity for an emotional distance that allows for the creation of a female self." (76) Though public space overpowers their individuality, the domestic sphere enables them to regain it.

In *Beloved*, Sethe develops her sense of resistance because of her past traumatic experiences. She develops a sense of resistance out of the fear that her children would also be turned into slaves if she stays in the north. The name of the house-Sweet Home- in Kentucky is ironic as it did not provide her with anything associated with a home. Her position in the sweet home is that of a commodity, she does not get treated like a human being. It is the evils of slavery that causes her to run away from Sweet Home plantations even when it puts her life in danger. It echoes her desire of resistance to resist the dehumanizing practise of slavery in every possible manner. The feeling of a home gets materialized only when Sethe reaches Cincinnati. The love and care that she gets here allow her to redefine herself and it also gives her confidence that it was the right decision to not let her children become prey to the havoc of slavery. It is the nurturing, empathetic environment of this Black household that leads Denver to think of it as the only space that would provide her with the opportunity to discover herself. Although the Black community looks at 124 as haunted, 124 plays a pivotal role in the necessary growth of Denver as a responsible individual.

In *The Bluest Eye*, violence is absent in the portrayal of this family. Although Mac Teer is presented as a strict mother to her kids but nowhere does she turn violent towards them. The base of this household much against the conventional understanding is harmony and love. The kind of

environment present in this household is ideal for the development of these girls into better human beings and this atmosphere assures them to fight against the injustice and malevolent ideologies of society. The narrator of the majority of the text, Claudia Mac Teer identifies that the safe and nurturing household that is provided to her is absent in the case of the Breedlove family. It is a completely dysfunctional family with the non-existence of love. This home owes its fragmentation to not only social-political conditions but the ideological setup of the society also contribute to it profusely. The racist ideological ideologies become more evident with the statement of Claudia when she says that "all the time we knew that Maureen Paul was not the enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful, and not us."

In *The Bluest Eye*, the character of Mrs Breedlove represents how a powerless woman like her chooses violence to give her life meaning. She finds the meaning of her life in senseless violence. Here violence gives her the power to redefine herself, to exercise her imagination and it gives her life a dramatic shape. The racial discrimination that takes place in society not only results in the establishment of White superiority but also results in the submissiveness and perpetration of violence. Pauline works as a servant in the White household, she has continuously been reminded of her not so desirable appearance and her inferior position. Pauline attempts to reverse her inferior status by inflicting violence on her own family. She uses it as a means through which she can get some power and the agency to discover herself.

Black Feminist Thought by Patricia Hill Collins explores four kinds of resistance as clear in the Black communities. These African-American women choose resistance by rejecting the processes and ideologies that resulted in their peripheral status. So, the first type of resistance takes place at the ideological level for example in *Sula*, Sula rejects the ideology that does not let her live a dignified life, she negates the negative image thrust upon her by the whites. Black women are generally presented as sexual objects but here Sula subverts this image as she becomes an independent and educated woman who decides her course of life.

Claudia's ideological resistance takes place at a different level. Claudia repudiates the qualities that are made the standard of beauty according to White norms. This is the time when she rejects the beauty of Shirley Temples and Maureen Temples as these standards of beauty are established on unfair grounds by whites. In *Beloved*, Denver faces a double struggle; the struggle for her own liberation from the traumatic past of Sethe and the struggle for her mother's liberation. Denver finally succeeds in doing both and it also becomes an act of ideological resistance where the identities given by the oppressor are left behind to embrace the new identities.

The second form of resistance is made apparent with the construction of a self-defined notion of Black Womanhood. All the female characters in the above-discussed novels do not get ultimate success in the creation of their own idea of Black womanhood but they do try to either subvert or reject the identities given to them by the unjust society.

The third level of resistance is evinced through the denial of images created by the oppressors. These female characters created by Morrison refuse to associate themselves with the derogatory and disparaging images of Black women created in the White-dominated world. By this negation, these women choose to resist the supremacist ideology and attempt to assert their own power.

The fourth type of resistance as observed by Collins is the recognition of the process of personal growth. How these characters embark upon the journey toward self-discovery Morrison records the personal growth of Claudia in her acceptance of herself and rejection of white standards of beauty. Sula refused to live according to the conventions and establishes herself as a Pariah instead. She decides to leave Medallion only to come back as a redefined individual. Analysis of the journey of Sethe from a slave to an independent Black woman also positively records her growth.

The holistic analysis of these novels brings us to the conclusion that all the characters try to resist the set patterns and ideologies of society. The author has tried to create although all of them do not get success in the establishment of an alternate space of self-assertion they all try to resist the multifarious parameters of oppression. The characters of Claudia, Sula and Denver present the challenges that the Black women have to face in their journey of resistance. Their resistance is aimed at the creation of a space that allows them to attain their true self. The kind of resistance that these characters offer is not limited to one kind, each character projects its resistance according to their circumstances and the society they live in.

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