

FROM ENSLAVEMENT TO EMANCIPATION: AN ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S CELIE AND ZORA NEALE'S JANIE THROUGH THE LENS OF BLACK FEMINISM

Zahida Mehrab¹ Shamima Khudadad¹

¹Department of English Language University of Balochistan Quetta, Pakistan

Received on: December 09/2020.

Published on: December: 19/2020.

Abstract

*This study investigates the racial and gender based violation and discernment faced by African-American women. The racial mistreatment over African-American in 1960s is inevitable and at gender level is even worse. The racial and gender conflicts raised revolutionary voices and thoughts by several female, among such feminists like Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston stand high. Their voices emerge as the strongest and they have turned up as the greatest literary figures and feminists due to portraying the hardships of African American women as Celie and Janie in their works *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Through *Celie* an African-American character, Alice Walker, portrays a sturdy kind of female who raises out of suffering and miseries. She, despite, suffering from physical and mental harassment, decides to survive than to choose to be a victim. In similar manner, Zora Neale Hurston, sketches a character in the shape of an African-American young girl sexually awakens and self-empowered character. She always tries her best to come out of her statuesque and peruse her self-freedom. The study equates both African-American heroines *Celie* and *Janie* in black feministic approach and depicts their journey from enslavement to emancipation.*

KEYWORDS: Feminism, American slavery, Race, Ender, Enslavement, Emancipation.

1. INTRODUCTION

“To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing”.

(Morrison, 2008, p. 145).

The present study attempts to draw a comparative approach in the novels of two African American activists and authors as Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. Alice Walker the winner of Pulitzer award has coined the term Womanism. Further, she throughout her life strives hard to give black women an identity and bring them out of enslavement to



emancipation. The very embodiment is her central character Celie in the novel *The Color Purple*. Celie emerges as a round heroine who further transcends into a resilient woman. Zora Neale Hurston, on the other hand, is another African American or black feminist who merely focuses on female empowerment. Likewise, Zora Neale Hurston portrays a heroine Janie who spends a journey from social bondage to self-deliverance.

Therefore, the female protagonists of both Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston with regard to their major novels *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with the Lens of black feminism as Celie and Janie break the conventional, stereotypical and stoic role of black female during 1960s in America.

It focuses first race as the prime cause of African American female's sufferings and miseries and later shows the empowerment of Celie and Janie in a racial based community. Moreover, in both fictions *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Walker and Hurston then portray the journey of Celie and Janie coming out of slavery to liberty or from enslavement to emancipation after coping with several bad states in life.

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study proposes the below mentioned objectives:

- To evaluate the impact of race in enslaving two African American protagonists Celie and Janie with reference to Walker's *the Color Purple* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- To examine the journey from enslavement to emancipation of Celie and Janie with context to Walker and Hurston's major fiction *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

1.2. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study aims to answers the following queries:

- How racial discrimination leaves an impact on lives of black women with special reference to Walker's heroine Celie in the *Color Purple* and Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?
- How Walker and Hurston's major fiction *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* show the journey of Celie and Janie from enslavement to emancipation?



2. RELATED WORK

The theory of feminism particularly of black feminism talks of the right of African American women. Feminism movement, initially, protests against the stereotypical and conventional role of women judged through her physical attributes, as St Thomas Aquinas calls women as imperfect man (Selden, 2005). On the other side, it's stated that Feminism takes its very roots from Europe and therefore, for understanding feminism, European history of women in 1920 should be glanced (Offen, 2012).

Furthermore, it has been well-quoted that, "The woman becomes victim of domestic violence. She has to struggle to provide her living. As a part of feminism study, the researcher uses feminism approach. It focuses on the explanation on how the character gets violence using Simone de Beauvoir theory *The Second Sex* (1949)" (Setiawan and Widyaningrum, 2020, pp. 67-80). Feminism takes years to happen in order to get women their due rights.

However, none ever tries to depict and show the worst statuesque of black female suffering from double oppressions; first from gender later on basis of race. Resultantly, another form of feminism develops termed as Black Feminism. As Carole Boyce Davies (1986) says male writers and critics have been called as the preserver of African American literature. However, the role of female is inevitable. The new generation of artist and critic belong to African American women (Davies, 1986). In the *Fourth Wave of Feminism: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* Introductory Remarks,

The study relies upon the help of the theory Black Feminism to highlight the journey of suffering to salvation experienced in the lives of two African American Heroines Celie from Alice Walker's *the Color Purple* and Janie from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The theory of black feminism gets highly popular in America through some perpetual efforts of few earliest Afro-American feminists or known during 1960 includes, Sojourner Truth, Alice Walker and Crenshaw. Sojourner Truth's speech in 1851 in Akron, generally titled *Ain't I am Woman*, talks about a visionary struggle for women's empowerment. She demonstrates few factors defending female rights and functions both physical and intellectual abilities; favoring women's equal rights.

Further, Kimberlé Crenshaw an Afro-American feminist who is credited as the founder of Black feminism by attempting how Negro women are marginalized in the name of sex and race, coined the term intersectionality and argues, If there was no amalgamated crowd of females that had involvement in suffering from gender discrimination, then it



marks no sense to extravagance chauvinism and racialism (Lindström, 2013). The inhuman treatment of African American seems constant and never ending.

According to Baga (2010) the role of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston in liberating black women is that of, Practically all of Walker's narratives, short stories, dissertations, and poetries focus on subjects of civil privileges, highlighting particularly the predicament of black females, who agonize the dual domination of racism and sexism. Walker's literatures are interested by her opinion that prose, while it may not consequence swift party-political and community modification, can broadcast the truths of hominoid grief and benefit set the world straight. An follower of the exertion of black women playwrights of prior groups, specifically Zora Neale Hurston, Walker crusaded to transport Hurston's effort, which was out of design and abandoned by fictional researchers, back toward prevalent and life-threatening acknowledgement. She hurled a Hurston revitalization with In Exploration of Zora Neale Hurston, an important object in Ms., and the excision of a gathering of Hurston's every work.

Like Zora Neale Hurston, Walker has anticipated all in her script to depict the inner strong point of black womenfolk, who—in vindictiveness of the inordinate probabilities in contradiction of them succeed to survive and bloom mentally (Baga, 2010). He highlights how Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston occupy an important role in promoting black feminism.

3. RACIAL BARRIERS TO CELIE AND JANIE'S PROGRESS

"The sun was gone...It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongued less, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment" (Jordan, 1998, pp. 105-117).

Racial discrimination leads African American people to suffer by all means. The embodiment of such victim of racial disparity has been portrayed by both Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Black female remained entrapped under the web of misrepresentation and stereotypical representation around the globe. Their role and functions in society have been, ironically underestimated. However, the wave of misrepresentation of African American only vanished through the works of black female writers.



Celie, the heroine in *The Color Purple* novel and an orphan black girl, lives with her cruel father who assaults her both physically and mentally. Female characters as Celie, Sofia and Squeak rely upon no self-identity of themselves.

All their actions are dependent on other male characters (Talif, 2014). Janie another Afro-American woman from the work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* spends a life of struggle to identify her true self and existence as a woman. Either black or Negro women strive hard to break the chain of slavery. Zora Neale Hurston portrays an African American heroine Janie who struggles hard to be heard and seen in the community of voiceless and sightless (Ibrahim, 2018). Walker and Hurston, thus, being Negro and Afro-American women try to portray a journey of women from their community from enslavement to emancipation.

Moreover, Sawsan Qashgar (2017) in her paper *Racism, Feminism and Language in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*, adds that the well-known work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been differently reviewed and received mixed views on scale of feminism (Qashgar, 2017) It appears not a tragic love story, however it rather talks of some greater issues as race, class and gender in American's 20th century.

4 A JOURNEY FROM ENSLAEMENT TO EMANCIPATION

“A strong woman who recklessly throws away her strength, she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away” (Hardy, 1891, p. 513).

It has been well said that, both characters Celie and Janie are the true sign of black protagonists coming to emancipation from enslavement (Abbandonato, 1991). Celie's character from *The Color Purple* has been repressed with silence as in her narration of story Walker writes, you better not never tell nobody but God. Hence, the story presents a quest of human desire and efforts for breaking silence (Calderson, 2007). On silence of black women Shao writes, the black women refer to a 'silent group' under marginalization of black men, white men and women. For them the only hand of comfort was their own gender in their community. Celie therefor, build a strong bond with other female characters in the novel too (Shao, 2017).

Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* writes on women's freedom from Janie's character that, every woman must have a little enjoyable moment in her life, at least for once. While her husband answers that, one woman has to stay at home. (Hurston, 1937).



Despite racial and gender based difficulties, Hurston portrays a character of voice who can speak up for her choices and thoughts.

Walker and Hurston broke the stereotypical image of an African American woman. They tend to explore a new aspect of black female to get unchained from the shackles of racial and patriarchal bondage. Celie and Janie are such embodiment of survivors from sufferings Jian Ting (2016). Likewise, shares equal opinion on Alice Walker's novels that it highly shows black feminism. Alice Walker's exceedingly renowned novel *The Color Purple* creates numerous female characters who depict the miseries and pain of black people or specifically, female in white mainstream society (Ting, 2016). Celie is a symbol of a highly strong women. She was restless to get a kind of life that can tell the truth to world an all wrong done to women in her society.

5. CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATION

Celie and Janie are the true representative of African American women facing several ups and downs. Celie remains a highly miserable young girl of fourteen abused in the hands of her step-father. She is a girl sinned against all sinning and silent against all voices. As it is well said regarding that Celie, the female hero in *The Color Purple*, originates to appreciate the critical environment of a male-defined goddess; consequently, she exemplifies an alternate for her oppressed and disregarded reality (Hemmati, 2020). Consequently, the epistolary novel begins with the life narration of Celie who tells all her pain and agonies. She suffers from constant rape and lose of two infants from it. She tells her story to God since she has been warned to tell none but God. The depiction of Celie shows Walker's approach in giving a voice to the silenced and oppressed black women from racial discrimination in a man-made society. Celie out of all her sufferings therefore, emerges as a strong female to overcome patriarchy.

Similarly, Hurston presents Janie who is the embodiment of a black women is deprived of her desires and wishes. Kaibartta (2020) African American womenfolk are experiential as supporters in the man-made philosophy. They have been made tortured and discredited underneath the male-made government. They have introduced themselves in more failings and softness public-sector than black masculine in culture then they nonexistence exceptionality double (Kaibartta, 2020). *The Color Purple* fights back all gender and racial based issues and emancipate her heroine Celie from all boundaries.

The study carries few suggestions as mentioned below,



1. Slavery system of America can be studied discussed with the reference of both novels *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
2. All the female characters can be under examined with the lens of black feminism in the following works *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
3. The themes of patriarchy are another important factor that can help future researcher to conduct a study on *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

6. REFERENCES

- Abbasiyannejad, Mina, and Rosli Talif. *The Exploration of Political Conflicts and Personal Relationships in Ian McEwan's The Innocent*. SAGE Open, (January 2014).
- Baga, A. (2010). *Celie s Emancipation Process in Alice Walker's the Color Purple*.
- Brewer, R. M. (April 2016). *Feminism, Black*. ResearchGate, 5.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *What's going on? Black feminist thought and the politics of postmodernism*. *Working the ruins: Feminist post structural theory and methods in education*, 41-73.
- Hemmati, S. (2020). *Irigarayan Sensible Transcendental in Alice Walker's the Color Purple*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 1-9.
- Jian-ting, L. U. O. (2016). *The double consciousness in the Color Purple*. *US-China Foreign Language*, 14(1), 26-31.
- Jordan, Jennifer. *Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7, no. 1 (1988): 105-117.
- Kaibartta, S. K. (2020). redefining female identity in 'their eyes were watching god 'by Zora Neale Hurston. *Jamshedpur Research Review*, 7.
- Lindström, W. S.-R. *Intersectionality*. London School of Economics and Political Science. 2013.
- Morrison, T. (2009). *A Mercy*. 2008. New York: Vintage.
- Neale Hurston. *Christian Century*, 105(16), 1035-1039.
- Offen, K. *Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach*. The University of Chicago. Press, 122. 2012.
- Raman Selden, P. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, Fifth edition*. New York: Harlow, England ; New York : Pearson Longman, 2005.
- Setiawan, Y. A., & Widyaningrum, A. (2020). *Man Domination And Domestic Violence Described In Sweat By Zora Neale Hurston*. *Dinamika Bahasa dan Budaya*, 15(1), 67-80.

