



Racism and Sexism in Fiction by Afro-American Women

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ABSTRACT

This article has two functions: (a) to illuminate the historical and sociological aspects of racism and sexism; and (b) to demonstrate how these two social paradigms of black existence get fictionalized in Afro-American novels by women. The novels examined are: Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Toni-Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982).

KEY WORDS: Black Women Writers, Fiction, Racism, Sexism, Black Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the seventeenth-century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African "species of men," as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master "the arts and sciences." If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 1985:8). In this seventeenth-century questioning of the African man's ability to create formal literature, we can see the earliest points of friction between western white man and the black man. Through the years Afro-American men and women have proved that they indeed belong to the human species and not to the lower orders. This they have proved amply through all forms of literature. But this is beside the point; what is of crucial relevance to this discussion is the European man's need to ask such a question at all. Herein we see the earliest stirrings of white racism: when white men felt that black men could be included in the "species of men" only if they could create literature or master "the arts and sciences." No such stipulation had ever existed in the case of the white man.

The two themes of racism and sexism are allied and have a parallel existence. They are mutually interdependent and hence they arise from the same set of circumstances. Gloria Steinem (1984:7) in her Introduction to *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* explains this connection thus: "Just as *mel* was universal but *female* was limited, *white* was universal but *black* was limited." Gloria Wade-Gayles (1984:34) depicts this phenomenon through the imagery of circles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America.

This imagery captures the omnipresent, all embracing reality of racism as a common factor in the lives of all blacks, irrespective of sex. Universal codes of social and psychological praxis as laid down by the dominant white culture were forcibly thrust upon the black man. Thus began the oppressive story of racial discrimination in America.

Racism and Sexism in Fiction by Black Women

The Afro-American race was ghettoized, persecuted and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. Racism, as such a life-threatening, non nurturing force exists even today, thus becoming the forum for all types of discussion. Black writers of both sexes have dealt with this theme extensively, either directly

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or indirectly. Male writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, find in racism a major theme for their novels. Women writers like Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker also talk of this basic reality, but something else carries equal weight with them; that is, sexual discrimination. Both racism and sexism are equally loaded propositions for these women novelists.

The black woman faced the reality of double discrimination, of both race and sex. She was a doubly burdened, doubly jeopardized, person. Paula Giddings (1984:6) explains:

. . . (in) the experience of Black women, (there) is the relationship between sexism and racism. Because both are motivated by similar economic, social, and psychological forces, it is only logical that those who sought to undermine Blacks were also the most virulent anti feminists. The means of oppression differed across race and sex lines, but the well spring of that oppression was the same.

Racism is a man-made, man-enforced phenomenon . . . may be defined as all of the learned behavior and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the formal group; behavior and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race (Hernton, 1965:175).

Racism, as a distinct phenomenon of the American social and political scene, was clearly rooted in that period of history wherein the first Africans were brought as cheap labor onto the American work force. White American owners and overseers saw these people as property, as machinery that could do inordinate amounts of work without demur, and in the process began to corrupt the very soul of these bewildered, lost people. Joel Kovel, in his critically penetrating analysis of racism, explains at length the theory whereby whites quantified blacks into a wholly new equation wherein they existed not as people, but as things. He says that the white slaver

first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then reduced the body to a *thing*; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange. . . . Thus, in the new culture of the West, the black human was reduced to a black thing, Virtually the same in certain key respects as the rest of non-human nature - all of which could become property. This reduction of human to non-human was the first definite step towards the establishment of racism as an innate archetype of white American civilization (Kovel 1984:18).

Dehumanization of the black slave into a statistic was only one of the steps that went into the creation of a racist America. Another weapon used was a psychological one, in that it would deliberately foist one culture-definitive paradigm of physical beauty and appearance onto another culture which had a completely different criterion of beauty. The Anglo-Saxon concept of beauty was forcefully thrust upon the black race as a necessary requirement for survival in America. White color had to be, and should be, the only criterion for survival, success and happy coexistence in America. Clark (1971:108) talks of this phenomenon thus: "The basic myth of racism is that white skin color brings with it superiority - that the white is more intelligent, more virtuous, more sexually controlled by the mere fact of being white." Being white in color implied a whole series of connotations: of being attractive - both physically and culturally - desirable, intelligent, reasonable and above all, worthy of love. Blackness was seen as a negative sign, a symbol of ugliness, uncontrolled irrational behavior, violent sexuality and so on.

Having allowed such a burden of evil, fear and diabolism to the black color, western philosophy, society and culture finally found the perfect personification of this misalliance in the black man. The devil was an abstract entity in western thought until western man encountered the black man from Africa. The triangle drawn between devil, black color and black man became firmly entrenched in the psyche of white America. Within this atmosphere of anger, hate and fear, with its background of blackness, began the extraordinary enactment of a tragedy wherein the black man was the principal villain. The aftermath of the Afro-American's attempt at integration led to a breakdown of his native values, such as self-respect, self-love, dignity and pride in one's own race. This extremely subtle, but very corrosive facet of racism had its birth in American history and its maturity in modern American thought.

., throughout history, whites have created the institutions by which black people are forced to live, and which force them to live in a certain way, almost invariably so as to foster . . . [a] constellation of unworthy traits, RACIAL AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN FICTION BY AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN 13 From slavery itself to modern welfare systems, this has been the enduring pattern ... (Kovel 1984:195).

This covert form of racism, which was subtle and deadly in its methodical progress, was doubly injurious to the black race in that not much notice was taken of its invisibly corrosive nature. Cruelty, torture, rape and bestiality - the marks of traditional racism, which form an important ingredient in the writings of black male writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison - do not find any place in fiction by Afro-American women. Racism plays an insidious role in these writings, but the effects of this type of discrimination are much more devastating in its repercussions. Racism and sexism co-exist in a traumatic alliance within the life of the black woman. For the black woman, racial discrimination together with gender discrimination proves to be a lethal combination. Any attempt to understand sexism within the American sociological context has to be preceded by a serious study of its genesis, as well as its quality of universality. As a distinct phenomenon it has existed right from the beginning of human existence. To get down to particulars: What is the position occupied by the black woman in the white patriarchal society of America? What is the historical background to her present social status? How has she managed to survive despite her fragile footing on the fringes of a racist and sexist society? Having been forced into slavery in an alien land, the Afro-American man and woman recognized early on that life could be mean, degrading and traumatically cruel. The black man's significance could be limited to his relevance as the major figure in a burgeoning labor-force. He existed in America on the southern plantations as a beast of burden continually toiling and enriching the coffers of his master.

Despite the inhuman conditions of his existence, the black man's condition was still much better than that of the black woman. The Afro-American woman bore a double-edged persecution: one, as a worker, both in the house as well as in the fields; two, as an object of sexual exploitation. She was seen as an over-sexed, immoral, loose woman who was always available for instant sexual gratification, as well as for the procreation of the race, thereby ensuring an unending supply of human beings for the ever-increasing needs of a capitalist machinery. In *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* Christian (1980:7), discusses this issue: "... the black woman was valued for her reproductive capacity ... the black woman was also seen as different from the white woman in her capacity to do man's work." The poor black woman slave was thrust under by a capitalist society which saw her as an inexpensive commodity, and therefore utilized her to the utmost, without any sense of guilt.

Looking carefully at this issue from a historical angle, one must consider the relationship between white men and black women. During the period of slavery the issues of sex and miscegenation were crucial, in that they were pivotal points on which the entire social and cultural life of the plantation existed. In the black woman, the white man/master found somebody whom he could use without making any commitments. This leads to continuous use and abuse, also to the cunning creation of a certain paradox - that the seemingly ignorant and innocent black woman was full of clever wiles with which she enticed the white man into her bed. Coupled with the horrible fascination for the black woman was the necessarily delicate dilemma of miscegenation. This was accepted *fait accompli*, since the mercenary planters saw in it something beneficial to their economic wellbeing.

The children born out of this sordid situation would become their property, and thereby increased both their wealth and labor force. This also led to the establishment of certain sexist patterns of behavior: the black woman (as well as the white woman) was seen as the white man's property and he could do whatever he pleased with them; rape became an entrenched aspect of plantation life. Given this preamble, the black woman came to be seen as someone over-sexed, insouciant, and unable to be considered as a civilized human being. She belonged more to the animal species, and therefore need not be accorded the courtesies due to a human being. Black women had to accept "racial polarity in the form of white supremacy and sexual polarity in the form of male dominance" (Hooks 1981:120).

With the unquestioning arrival of this "loose woman" image onto the platform of American sexuality and sexual politics, a kind of reverse discrimination began to function in the southern white woman's life on remote plantations. With permissive sex understood, albeit unstated, part of the white man's culture, a sacred mission was laid upon the white woman. As the repository of the white man's seed, she had to function on an ethereal level, where she was accorded the greatest honor, but where she led a lonely existence. Being the undefiled mother of a superior culture she was weighed down by her role as keeper, guardian and matriarch of the white man's birthright and true lineage.

These white women led a split existence; on one level they were the holy mothers of a whole race, on another they were simple, ordinary women who led frustrated lives. All in all, the black woman began to be seen as evil incarnate, robbing white women of their men as well as corrupting a whole way of life. Diachronically the white woman became a superior being and the black woman, a symbol of evil. Coming as they did from her white owners, both male and female, various burdens were laid upon the black woman. Frances Beal (1970:343) summarizes this whole paradigm thus:

Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually assaulted and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worse kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white offspring while her own children were starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine your own household - and to be powerless to reverse this syndrome.

With this as background, the black man-woman relationship must now be considered. How did the black man, a slave and a mistreated, tormented one at that, react to the sordid sexual oppression faced by his woman? On the obvious level, he had some amount of sympathy for her; he also had a great weight of helplessness pressing down on him which prevented him from aiding her. But on a deeper level, on the level of psychic reality, he felt unwanted and inadequate. The creation of the "loose woman" image corroded the black man-woman bond; it led to the feeling that the black woman was a wanton who enjoyed sexual dalliance rather than marital permanence. To the black man, his woman appeared to prefer the white man, and this was the basis for the earliest misunderstanding in their relationship. Inexplicably, unconsciously, the black man began to get the idea that his wife was better pleased by the white man's performance. His pride was wounded, his virility drooped, and gradually he came to think of the black woman as his enemy. Circumstances and human psychology prevented him from deeply questioning the black woman's traumatic existence.

He was both ill-equipped and insensible to the actualities of her torment; on another level, he was powerless to help her get away from the clutches of white racism and sexual discrimination. Her severe moral and sexual castigation coupled with his numbed helplessness created a weakened social and familial relationship. Gerda Lerner (1972:xxiii) in her pioneering work *Black Women in White America* had much light to throw upon this awful predicament:

... ever since slavery, they (black women) have been exploited by white men through rape or enforced sexual services. These sexual mores, which are characteristic of the relationship of colonizers to the women of the conquered group, function not only symbolically but actually to fasten the badge of inferiority onto the enslaved group. The black woman was degraded by the sexual attack and, more profoundly, by being deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection.

The aftermath of this situation was that black men began to see their women as emasculators, as larger than life figures of misplaced sexual affection. Gloria Wade-Gayles (1984:10) draws a powerful picture of this damaging construct:

Black women . . . are obese, bandannaed women who are neither dainty nor feminine and certainly not pretty Black women are devalued sex objects RACIAL AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN FICTION BY AFRO- AMERICAN WOMEN . . . castrating women who exacerbate the powerlessness of black men.

The black man's role vis-a-vis the black family, both during slavery and after emancipation, deserves consideration. During slavery, he played a very marginal role in the maintenance or provisioning of his family. His children may or may not be his, he could never be sure of their paternity. Unless of issue were decided by maternity; he, his wife or his children could be sold away at any moment, and he had no say in the matter. After the bitter turmoil of the Civil War, during which blacks were emancipated, there was some amelioration in the condition of their lives. The First World War brought on chaotic days all over the world and it affected Afro-Americans, too. The crucial period after the war, coupled with the Great Depression, brought on further tribulations to the blacks of America, upsetting the institutions of family and society. Many black men could not find jobs and racial discrimination was at its apex. At such a time, when survival itself was at stake, the black woman had to forget her pride and her secondary role in the family and had to get out to look for a job. Black women took on the role of the breadwinner reluctantly, but their men saw this as insubordination, as proud patronization.

The desperate actions of these hapless women came as a blow to black male pride and self-respect. Black men took this as a personal insult, a throwback to slavery times when women played a more primary role in the maintenance of their families: " . . . black men, unable to get and keep jobs, display resentment toward black women who assume the role of 'provider'" (Lewis 1977:345). As a consequence these men saw their women as all-powerful castrators and emasculators. He thought that "the black woman had gotten out of hand. She was too strong, too hard, too evil, too castrating. She got all the jobs, all the everything. The black man had never had a chance" (Wallace 1978:11). With this historical and sociological scenario providing a general background to the reality of sexism and sexual discrimination, present conditions can be discussed. In what circumstances do black women now exist? Black

women lead lives of quiet desperation, trying either to free themselves or to militate against a white racist, male-dominated, patriarchal society. One good reaction in recent years has been the effort made by this -minority group to present their case through the media of literature, drama and song. Awareness of their plight accompanied by higher levels of education and economic well-being have lent strength to their agitation. They are slowly rectifying the neglect portrayed by Lerner (1972:xvii):

Black women have been doubly victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions. Belonging as they, do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society - Blacks and women - they have been doubly invisible.

Keeping sexual and racial discrimination in mind, black women of all professions and persuasions have tried to ameliorate the conditions of their oppressive lives. Black writers, both men and women, have portrayed women in their works. The depiction of women in the novels of the twentieth century have varied tremendously depending upon who has been writing about them. When famous black male writers, like Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison have portrayed women characters, they have been extremely derogatory. For example in *Native Son*, Wright portrays Bigger Thomas's mother and sister as bitchy characters. Ralph Ellison's womenfolk are not much better. Only James Baldwin has depicted women as having some intrinsic worth.

In most of the Afro-American novels mentioned earlier racism exists at a very subtle or cerebral level, but sexism is generally of vital and immediate interest. The first novel by a black woman - Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's novel, *lola Leroy*, *Shadows Uplifted* - portrays a young, beautiful Christian octoroon who is totally unaware of the Negro blood in her veins and who believes herself to be a white; As a white slaveholder's daughter and a southern lady, she defends slavery and considers it a necessary reality of plantation life. Lola behaves thus despite the fact that she is a practising Christian who should have commiserated with the pathetic lives of the slaves. Harper's heroine looks white, and on this strength behaves exactly like a white, that is, as a racist. She is ready to condemn blacks to a life of servitude because of their negritude. Lola's opinions change when she is thrown into slavery because she has a few drops of black blood. Sex-crazed white men try very hard to get her into their clutches. Of course, Lola successfully resists these coarse demands. Now a black woman, Lola understands the life led by black women and how they have been misrepresented as loose, licentious and immoral. Frances Harper stresses the fact that black women were being raped by white men, as against the popular belief that black men were raping white women. Thus it is evident that, right from the beginning, black women novelists regarded themselves as being black and female, and threw light upon these critical issues in their novels.

Nella Larsen was an important author of Harlem Renaissance who made her mulatta heroine's life consciously pathetic and meaningless in *Quicksand*. Helga Crane knows that a blind imitation of white values will not lead to either happiness or satisfaction. Helga's appearance and personality would automatically qualify her as a true lady. But she knows that the society which was extolling her now, would bristle in extreme condemnation if they knew the reality of her mixed parentage. Helga's story conveys the truth about race and its accompanying prejudices which always lurk beneath the surface. Being a beautiful, passionate woman she knows that she could easily marry a white man, but then she would end up being just an exotic possession. She is able to avoid doing so because she is not only beautiful but also intelligent. In an attempt to deny her own sensuality she marries a travelling minister who takes her to rural Alabama, where she is quickly suffocated in the quicksand of poverty, stupidity and continual childbearing. Blindly self-sacrificing, Helga realizes that her gender is a burden because it thrusts upon her unnecessary or unwarranted responsibilities. Nella Larsen's portrait of a black woman emphasises the reality of color and the trauma of sexual oppression. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* portrays Janie Stark whose life is troubled by both racial and gender discrimination.

As Hurston (1937:29) describes the plight of the black woman:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been pray in' fuh it tuh be different wid you, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!

Since Janie is a mulatta with straight, long hair, the men in her life consider her a prize, something to be fought over and won. Consequently Janie is treated more as a thing than as a living, thinking individual. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, and her second, Jody Stark, both in their own typical mule fashion, expect her to behave as a

conventional black woman. This means that she has to work like a dog unquestioningly for her first husband; and be the Queen of the Porch, with her second one. She realises that she is no more his wife, his helpmate or his lover, but simply his property. Along with this sense of rejection as a woman comes the feeling of loneliness, as she is cut off from the local black community. In withdrawal she pulls away from her husband, her marriage and the world around. When Teacake enters her life - a man who finally treats her as a woman with a heart and a head - Janie becomes a complete woman who is comfortable and happy with herself, her community and the world. When Teacake dies she does not think of her life as a tragedy; she sees it as rich and full.

Racism does not play as important a role as sexism in this novel. Yet incidents with racial tones are to be seen, especially in the second half of the novel when there is a hurricane. At this crucial time of distress, the whites around discriminate against the Afro-Americans by denying them a safe refuge against the wild storm. Later, after the hurricane has killed many of the blacks, the dead are denied a proper burial. Once again blacks are deprived of all that is socially correct on the basis of their race. With Ann Petry's *The Street* we move from the rural environments of the South to the urban ghetto of Harlem. She is concerned with the social and economic problems faced by black women on the streets of big cities. What does the hostile urban environment and the constant presence of crime on these streets do to single, unprotected black women? Race and gender become prime elements in the narration of this novel.

Lutie Johnson is beautiful and light-skinned, a single mother with a small son, who has to go out into the harsh world to earn her livelihood. This leaves her small boy alone and vulnerable to the sordid demands of the ghetto. Like the tragic mulatta of the earlier novels, she does not believe in using her charms to improve the quality of her life. Petry presents Lutie as a lower-class black woman who is seen by her neighbors, especially the men, as a whore despite the fact that she is a decent woman. In their minds a single woman could represent nothing pure or decent; her withdrawn loneliness works against Lutie, for which she has to suffer. At the beginning of the novel her husband leaves her for another woman because he cannot understand, or sympathize, with her single-minded quest for wealth and a comfortable life. Another cause for marital strife is the fact that whereas she can find work, he cannot; thus their marriage falls apart, Petry is clearly pointing a finger here at white society which deprives black people of all that is noble and enriching. By trying to attain unattainable white standards of life and behavior, blacks suffer and are eventually crippled.

Racism and its malaise create the natural setting for tragedy in Petry's novel. Alone with a small child in the big city, Lutie tries to raise herself from her lowly station. Unable to do so, she tries to get established in the entertainment world - thereby bringing into the realm of the novel the stereotype of the black singing woman. Once again Lutie is frustrated in her attempts when she realises that talent alone is not enough; her only saleable commodity is her sex. Survival would depend upon utilizing this commodity without qualms. Lutie refuses to do so despite her miserable existence. Her insistence upon maintaining her moral standards leads her to murder her future employer when he tries to rape her. In the whole novel this is her only sign of rebellion, and at the end we see Lutie putting all her strength into this act of pent-up frustration. Unlike the earlier novels by black women, Jwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* is a

series of lyrical, perhaps autobiographical, vignettes about a black girl growing up in a closely knit family. Unlike *The Street*, this work emphasizes the sensitivity of the black girl-woman in an urban community (Christian 1980:68).

Maud Martha lives a sheltered existence, protected from the harsh world; therefore she is able to find nourishment within herself. A major difference about Maud Martha is that she is no beauty; she is just an ordinary black girl. But in her ordinariness lies her beauty. As a simple black woman, Maud Martha has to face the realities of the world where even upper-class Negroes can be snobbish towards those lower down the scale. When she goes out to work she has to face the day-to-day racism of a white world. As a black mother she has to endure, as well as enlighten her daughter.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* Pecola Breedlove prays every night for blue eyes, which she recognizes as the ultimate, and most important, validation for beauty. Living in an ugly and cruel world where her parents fight brutally, and where school is the playground for vicious taunts and threats, Pecola yearns to be loved. Her realization at a very early age that beauty is necessary for being loved, bewilders her at first, and later releases a stream of supplications to a God who never hears. Equating love with beauty as two necessary accompaniments that would reduce the cacophony in her life, Pecola succumbs to the western concepts of beauty. Markedly Anglo-Saxon in its dimensions, white American prescriptions for beauty include blonde hair, white skin, and above all, blue eyes.

Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl driven literally insane by "the pressures toward absolute physical beauty in a culture whose white standards of beauty . . . are impossible for her to meet, though no less alluring and demanding. Surrounded by cultural messages that she is ugly by definition, she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia ... (Hedin 1982:49-50).

The tragedy and anger in *The Bluest Eye* derive from two factors: the desire for blue eyes by a black girl, incongruous in itself but all the more so because it implies an underlying desire for assimilation, verification and acceptance by white people; and the frustration and impotence of a group of people whose daily prayer for survival is blended with a heavy desire for tolerance and freedom. Pecola's direct prayer for blue eyes is synchronized with Pauline's need for order and Cholly's need for economic strength. All three of them are victims of a vicious dream -- of an ideal way of life, which exists in a perfect form in the outside world, the world of the Anglo-Saxon American. Age-old issues, such as racial discrimination and sexual stereotyping, lead to certain trauma in the case of black men and women. Such is the case with Cholly and Pauline. Having fallen into the trap of a vicious system that denies them their sexual roles, they find themselves in an inverted position where the woman is the inadvertent breadwinner, and where the male is a liability, a drain on the family's resources. Denied their allotted roles in the scheme of society, these poor black people resort to mutual exploitation. They brutalize each other, their children, their neighbors, and in this manner the whole race. Pecola's rape by her father provides the natural denouement of a drama which has been going on for centuries:

Pecola Breedlove is the tragic character in the novel. She is victimized by both parents because they are made incapable of nurturing her by the limiting phenomena of race, sex, and class. Out of a deep well of self-hatred and psychic pain, they give Pecola the fullest measure of their misery. Pauline loves Pecola, but she beats her . . . Cholly loves Pecola, but he rapes her (Wade-Gayles 1984:77).

With Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* the issue of sexism is brought into greater focus; racism also finds its mark in this work of fiction. Celie suffers on the basis of her sex all through the novel, until she gathers strength from the other women, like Sofia and Shug. Victimized and tortured by Mr. and generally treated on all fronts, Celie slowly becomes acclimatized to this state of affairs. Indeed she tells Harpo to beat Sofia in order to subdue and dominate her. It is sad to see that "Celie is so indoctrinated and victimized by sexism that even she herself participates in its perpetuation" (Hudson-Weems 1989:203).

The racial dimension of this novel is not as pronounced as the sexual one, but it appears forcefully in the scene where the mayor's Wife patronizingly confronts the strong Sofia. The white racist domination and aggression in this scene cause Sofia's arrest and imprisonment which prove that members of the dominant race always win, irrespective of everything else. Racism is a constant in the lives of all the characters in *The Color Purple* and makes their plight hopeless. The issue of sexism gets resolved by the end of the novel, when Celie is able to assert her independence. She reaches this state by imbibing Sofia's strong spirit and Shug's carefree independence. But the issue of racism never gets resolved, which in itself is a statement on this problem in modern America.

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is synonymous with the pain and suffering of women who have been oppressed and discriminated against on the score of race and sex. Women like Mattie, Cora Lee and Luciela are all at Brewster Place because they have nowhere else to go; they have reached the end of the road. Their pathetic lives have all reached this dead-end because of their racial and sexual identity. Traumatized and economically vulnerable, these poor women cannot survive in the white world. They have been abandoned by their men and look after themselves and their children single-handedly. Brewster Place echoes with the blues, but there are the strains of a subdued joy also. Black women are tough and enduring; they are survivors as well as victims. In conclusion the words of Hernton's (1965:166) tribute to the Afro-American woman.

CONCLUSION

Finally, after nearly four centuries of oppression, having been raped, murdered, lynched, spat upon, pushed through back doors, denied human respect, thought of and treated as sluts and mummies and Negresses, fit only to breed and suckle babies, to wash and cook and scrub and sweat, after having been sexually depersonalized and taken bodily for the having, the Negro women of the modern era are just beginning to be recognized as human beings, as American citizens with public rights and duties, private longings and desires, like any other citizen of this republic.

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