

**FEMALE SURVIVORS IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE* AND
ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE***

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Abstract

Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are the most celebrated women novelists in African American literature. Both have successfully depicted the horrible realities in the lives of blacks in general and black women in particular. The present paper investigates into Toni Morrison as well as Alice Walker's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple* respectively. The paper particularly studies the survival of women in the respected novels. The paper shows that how both Morrison and Walker are similar in their attempt to show the survival of black women against all the odds in the society.

Keywords: black women, African American Literature, society.

Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have portrayed the lives of the blacks in general and black women in particular. They have shown the tragedy of black women under the yoke of triple exploitation on the account of race, gender and class. Morrison has highlighted the dilemma of racism in her novel *The Bluest Eye* with delineating a female adolescent black girl child. As Manuela Ramirez rightly observes about her: "Morrison has delved in many of her novels into the impact of psychological trauma on the female teenagers' selfhood." (76) Whereas Walker too deals with the deplorable condition of black women on the account of their gender. Rita Felski observes about Walker's novels "Her writing helped her to overcome the pain and begins to underneath a talent that would allow others the chance to heal." (qtd. Zare :42) In both of these novels the female characters are suffered, humiliated, exploited and marginalized and they strive hard for their own survival.

Pecola, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is a member of one of the black families in Lorain Ohio. Being black she is considered ugly not only from her family members but also from the society. She is a victim of the age-old ideology of racism. She is a complete victim of racism as well as patriarchy. There are many incidents in the novel which make it clear that she is a sufferer. Though Morrison has portrayed Pecola and her mother as sufferers in the novel there are the characters from Mac Teers family who are the survivors in the novel. Pauline too is portrayed by Morrison as a woman who stands against all odds in her life. She is a victim of male patriarchy in the African American society. Her husband Cholly is an embodiment of male patriarchy and treats her badly. Even Pauline has to work as a maid servant at white family.

Pauline accepts her tragic lot and works for the Fisher family. This is Pauline's survival where she feels safe and secure. She nourishes all her love upon white employer's children on the other she hates her own family members. She accept the white standards of beauty. This is her acceptance which make her successful in her survival in the white dominated America. Unlike Pauline, Pecola is not seen as a survivor in the novel. Though like her mother she is ready to accept the white values and prays for the blue eyes her attempt is failed. Pauline is observed as a survivor in the sense that she fights against all the odds in her life. Working outside she helps her husband to improve the economic status of their family. She accepts all the challenges in her life. So undoubtedly she is one of the survivors in the novel. Like Pauline Claudia, one of the girl child from Mac Teers family is the survivor in the novel. But Cladia's attempt is totally different than Pauline. Pauline has accepted the white values on the other hand Claudia does not accept those white values impose upon the blacks by the white culture.

Claudia's character becomes unique in *The Bluest Eye* with her attempt to reject the blue eyed white dolls. She does not have attraction for the white values like Pecola and Pauline. Thus Morrison portrays two families in *The Bluest Eye* viz. the Breedloves and the Mac Teers. The Breedloves are seen completely victims of the white racism. Only Pauline is able to survive in the novel with her hardwork. Pauline's attempt to be and behave like the Whites throws light upon the dominance of White culture. Gradually she ignores her own house, her husband, and children and lavishes all her love upon her White employer's children. In her, one observes an attempt of a Black woman to alienate herself from her own community. A self-conscious rebel is seen in Pauline who tries to assert her identity by accepting the White standards in order to avoid victimization. As Shelby Steel puts it: "To be a black was to be a victim, therefore not to be a victim was not to be a black." (58) Pauline tries to capture the white standard to avoid the ugliness in her life. Otherwisw the black characters Cholly, Pecola and Sammy don't have any hope to survive in the white world. It is Mac Teers family which stands for survival of blacks in general and black women in particular.

Morrison giving the example of Mac Teers wants to convey the idea of mutual understanding as well as female solidarity. In the novel Claudia and her sister Frieda sow some merigolds in the courtyard of their house with the hope that Pecola's child will survive. This is the genuine involvement necessary for the survival of black women in the male dominated African American society. When Cholly puts the family outdoors it is only Mac Teers family which supports Pecola. When Henry Molests Frieda Mr. Mac Teer is ready to kill him. It shows the self worth the Mac Teers feel about themselves. This self worth is responsible for their own survival in the white society. It's undoubtedly true that *The Bluest Eye* talks about the sufferings of black women due to racism but at the same time Morrison shows Pauline Breedlove, and the members of the Mac Teers family as the strugglers who try to establish their own identity. They don't have the same tragic fate like Pecola who becomes mad at last in the search of blue eyes. They are anyhow survived in the white dominated American society. As Manuela Ramirez observes about the Mac teers family: "Claudia and her family exemplify the ability of blacks to cofront and rebel against an oppressive system." (81). But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me; the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, "Awwwww", but not for me? The eye slide of black woman as they

approached them on the street. And the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.(15) Here Claudia shows the disgust and hatred in the psyche of the blacks towards the Whites.

One notable thing here is that like Pecola she is not observed as a victim of white standard of beauty. She doesn't praise the white standard of beauty. The adults give her the white baby dolls. Instead of playing with them Claudia destroys them. As Claudia as a narrator writes: "How strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotions of years of unfulfilled longings preened in their voices. I did not know why I destroyed those dolls. But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas." (21) Here it is seen that the will of a girl child is crushed under the falsehood of the dominant culture in the society. Claudia, being one of the struggler remains unforgettable. The reason behind it is she doesn't approve the falsehood of American standard of beauty. She is the only character in the novel a care taker which is very important to note in the novel. Through her character Morrison wants to show the need of love and mutual understanding among the blacks to survive in the white dominated racist society. As a black girl child Claudia experiences the same poverty and oppression in the white society. So it is this poverty and humiliation that makes her to hate not only the white dolls but also the white girls. In this way she is not seen as a victim of the age old culture like Pecola. Her act of crushing the white dolls shows the fighting instincts within her which ultimately helps her to survive. As Holloway asserts: "Claudia, who survives this story, has the attitude that enables her survival."(41) Thus Morrison's attempt in *The Bluest Eye* is not only to show the victimization of the black women but their ability to survive in the racial white dominated society.

Similarly, Alice Walker though depicts the gender exploitation in *The Color Purple* she delineates some characters' survival in the patriarchal set of the African American community. She depicts humiliation, exploitation and marginalization of black women on the one hand as well as she provides the ways for their survival as well. As Somayeh Zare rightly asserts in this respect: "*The Color Purple* emerges out of Alice Walker's concern with defining with existence, experience and culture of Afro-American women and brutality of oppression that shapes it. It deals with the role of male domination in despiriting black women's struggle for identity, existence, independence." (42) In *The Color Purple* Celie the protagonist, Nettie her sister, Sofia are the victims of male patriarchy as well as racism in the society. They are portrayed as sufferers in the novel as well as they stand against the evils in the society. They struggle hard and try to survive in the male dominated African American society. From the very beginning of the novel Celie's sufferings start. She is very helpless when she is raped by her stepfather Alphonso and warned by him not to tell anybody the truth. Alphonso, being a patriarch tries to crush the voice of Celie. But later Celie starts writing letters to God. In those letters she narrates her pains and sufferings. She gives voice to the voiceless. Symbolically her attempt of survival starts from writing letters. As Suranukharin rightly asserts: "Celie's letters to God can then be seen as her foundational step towards liberation." (6) Her attempt is very significant in writing letters where she shares her utmost feelings and it helps her for identity formation. As Elizabeth Pifer argues: "Celie participates in the creation of the meaning for herself through language. Without language, silenced would have ensured madness or, as in her mother's case, an early death." (156) The letters written in the beginning of the novel show Celie as a timid and a submissive woman. She is forcefully married to Albert. She takes care of his house as well as his

children. She does not protest against her husband. But later in the novel she meets Sofia who is Albert's son Harpo's wife as well as Albert's lover Shug Avery. Both Sofia and Shug Avery are very important in the development of Celie's character.

In one of her letters Celie informs about Shug's house in Memphis. Through the details Celie gives about Shug's living one understands Shug's self-exploration. As Celie narrates: "Shug's house is big and pink and look sort of like a barn... She got a whole bunch of elephants and turtles everywhere. Some big, some little, some in the fountain. Some up under the trees." (188) It is here in Memphis Celie comes to know about Shug's life. Shug is a woman who wants Celie to go ahead. She says to Celie: "You not my maid. I did not bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you get on your feet." (191) The lines show how Shug helps Celie to understand her own life. She wants to make her independent. She helps Celie to survive in the male dominated society. Mae Henderson has observed about Shug: "Unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self." (16) In the hostile environment of male patriarchy the character like Shug Avery shows her creativity and artistic bent of mind. Walker has portrayed her as a Blues singer. Her character becomes dynamic with her artistic talent. Walker has highlighted the need for artistic genius in women to stand erect in the male dominated society. As the narrator writes about her: "She got statues of folk I never heard of and never hope to see. She got a whole bunch of elephants and turtles everywhere... and all over her house. Curtains got elephants, bed spread got turtles." (215) She is a woman who does cooking differently. As Celie informs: "Nobody cook like Shug when she cook, She git up early in the morning and go to the market. But only stuff that's fresh. Then she came home and sit on the back step humming and shelling peas or cleaning collards or fish or whatever she brought. Then she git all her pots going at once and turn on the radio." (217) The lines show her individual style of cooking. It surprises Celie. Shug's character helps Celie to understand the world better. She gives sexual education to Celie which transforms Celie's life: "Listen, she say, right down there... lot of finger and tongue work." (77) It is through this sexual education Celie discovers her own self and comes to know of her own bodily pleasure.

The character of Shug is the total opposite of Celie. As Mukul Sengupta writes about it: "Apparently she is represented in the text as an opposite of Celie, but inherently she is the vehicle of female consciousness and empowerment within Celie." (190) Shug's character is important due to her comment upon religion and God. In her conversation with Celie she gives her different views on religion. She says: "The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only then that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit." (176) She gives her views on cosmology which are very central to the title of the novel. As she says: "It pisses God off if you walk by *The Color Purple* in a field somewhere and don't notice." (177) Here Shug initiates the beauty of nature Celie becomes one of the survivors in the novel due to Shug's moral support to her. She is a woman who shares her body with Celie and gives her ultimate joy. She is a woman who breaks all the conventions of the society. Suranukharin observes about her: "...Shug refuses to be dominated by anyone. Instead of subjecting her will to others and allowing them to impose an identity upon her, she has fashioned her own identity with the world of blues music... with her blues spirit, Shug often expresses herself in a different way from other

conventional black women.” (11). She is one of the survivors in the novel .She is seen as a taboo breaker who does not think about the opinion of others. “ With the embrace of blues spirit, although she is despised by people in her black community, she never feels threatened by those evaluations of her. She is able to survive all difficulties and choose to live in her own way.” (12)In the development of Celie’s character Shug plays a vital role. It is Shug who helps Celie to find out the hidden letters of Celie’s sister Nettie.

The discovery of these letters reveals the true nature of Albert. celie becomes aware of Albert’s betrayal and becomes aggressive in the novel. Therefore Shug’s character is important not only in the development of the plot but also the development of Celie’s character. Shug gives power to Celie. Her love and mutual support opens up new avenues for Celie’s imagination and Artistic talent.In her company Celie becomes confident and starts sewing pants. Her sewing hobby later turns into a business. In this respect Shug helps Celie to become independent in the novel.She gets genuinely involved in sewing pants for Jack, Sofia’s sister’s husband. Celie narrates : “ I dream and dream over Jack’s pants,and further she adds,” They have to be camel. And soft and strong. And they have to have big pockets so he can keep a lot of children’s things... so he can run if he need to snatch a child out of the way of something.” (220) Celie establishes a company sewing pants unlimited which shows her independent self. Celie’s journey is from weakness to strength; insecurity to security; imperfection to perfection. So the letters written at the end of the novel shows Celie as a self confident and independent woman. She is optimistic as well as happy at the end of the novel. She writes : “ I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children.” (194) She talks about her sewing pants at the end of the novel which shows her potential as an independent woman. She says : “ I ‘m busy making pants for Sofia now. One leg be purple, one leg be red. I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon.” (195).In the half of the novel the character of Celie is portrayed by Walker is the passive and submissive one which is a flat type of character. But later she becomes independent with starting her own sewing business.

She establishes sisterly relationship with the other women Shug Avery and Sofia in the novel. At the end Celie is totally changed At the end she signs her name in her letters which shows her changing attitude as well as her identity formation..As Suranukharin rightly asserts : “ The fact that Celie is finally able to sign her name in her letters to Nettie also indicates her personal growth as an individual; she no longer regards herself as passive and worthless.” (8-9) Like Shug there is Sofia who is one of the survivors in the novel.She is also humiliated and exploited like Celie and Nettie on the account of gender.But at the same time her character has shown a powerful spirit to survive against the all odds. As Kashinath Ranveer observes: “Though her struggle is not always successful, it provides an opportunity to her to display her fortitude and ability to transcend her racist and sexist circumstances,her varying responses to her environment illustrate the need for the development of the black society which allows for an individual to define on’e meaningful existence within the larger American society.” (90) Both Shug and Sofia being the sympathizer of Celie become important characters in the novel. Both Shug and Sofia are the survivors in the novel who stands against male patriarchy.

Shug is a woman who shows her authority on others and aggressive. Sofia too does not want to live life under the domination of her husband ,Hapo. She has the fighting spirit within her .She raises her voice not only against racial discrimination but also male patriarchy in the

novel .She narrates her experience to Celie about her imprisonment: “They got me in little store room up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa’s porch,and just as warm in the winter time. I’m at the back and call all night and all day. They won’t let me see my children. They won’t let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I’m a slave ,she say.” (108) Though she is suffered and humiliated due to racism as well as male patriarchy her attempt to set free from all the odda and to live a free life is very remarkable. It is her ability to fight back makes Celie to understands herself. Sofia becomes a role model for Celie. She is a round type of character in the novel . As Celie writes about her physique: “ But she still a big strong girl. Arma got muscle. Legs too. She swing that baby about like it nothing.” (34) She puts forth a good example in front of Celie to overcome the tyranny of male dominated culture. She is a woman who advises Celie to protest. She says : “ Youought to bash Mr----‘s head open. Think about heaven later.”(40) Already Sofia had abandoned her husband because of his ill treatment .She wants to live life in her own way. Sofia is a woman portrayed by Walker as a taboo breaking woman. She does not hesitate to fight back with her husband. She breaks all the gender codes: “But it harpo and Sofia. They fight like two men.” (37) Sofia’s character is the aggressive whereas Celie is a submissive type of character. Till the half of the novel celie’s character is a flat type of character which does not undergo any change. But with the arrival of Shug and Sofia in her life her transformation starts. She with the encouragement of Shug and Sofia becomes independent and starts her own business of sewing pants. As Harris Trudier observes about her transformation: “From a used and abused woman, Celie emerges as an independent, creative businesswoman. She moves from being ugly duckling to a figuratively beautiful swan.She moves from being Hurston’s mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declaration of independence, to a reunion with her children and sister.” (35) Sofia shares her genuine feelings with Celie.In a conversation with Celie she says: “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight to my daddy.I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight to my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I love Harpo,she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me.” (39)

One another female character namely Squeak is portrays by walker to signify the importance of the artistic talent. Squeak is also a black singer like Shug who sings at Harpo’s Juke Joint. She sings: “ They calls me yellow

like yellow be my name
But if yellow is a name
why ain’t black the same
well ,if I say Hey Black girl
Lord,she try to ruin my game.”(85-86)

Here Squeak exposes the tyranny of male dominated world.” Black and yellow are associated with the standard of beauty created by a white patriarchal world where people are always judged by their skin, color and outer appearance.” (Suranukkharin:13) Though Squeak’s character stands for woman’s independent self. Her character directly appeals to all women to become independent with developing the artistic genius.In the novel she has become independent as well as powerful with her profession of singing. By singing at the Juke point she is able to earn money. She does not want to lead a normal life but to be creative in her own way. She insists Harpo that she is going to join Shug in the North: “ I want to sing... (172) At the end

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of the novel Squeak too like Celie has become independent and decisive. She takes a decision to leave Grady her new lover and goes to Memphis to live with her sister and mother. It is her ability of singing that makes her character strong in the patriarchal set up of African American society. As Suranukharin asserts: "Without her ability to sing, Squeak would be the same as any other black woman and would not be able to escape from the tyrannical patriarchal system." (14) Through Squeak's character Walker again highlights the idea of education as well as self-learning for the black women. It is the only way for them to achieve freedom. Sunitha Diwakar too rightly asserts about Walker: "Walker is not just concerned about women but is committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire community." (136)

Thus Morrison's Pauline, Claudia, Mrs. Mac Teers in *The Bluest Eye* and Walker's Celie, Nettie, Shug, Sofia and Squeak in *The Color Purple* are the females survivors in the racial and male dominated African American society. The attempt of both of the novelists Morrison and Walker is successful in true depiction of survival of black women in the white American society.

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