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THE SUPPRESSION & OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN AFRO-AMERICAN SOCIETY REPRESENTED THROUGH WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

African – American society has a long history of racism, sexism, slavery and gender discrimination. They have suffered brutality to the extent of being auctioned, stripped and examined to determine their reproductive capacity. Sexual education was imparted to young girls through their mothers; with several historical movements the women writers were able to break the jinx. The present paper examines the state of women in Afro-American society, its cause and effect. The women writers have transmuted these atrocities through their writings.

Keywords:- racism, sexism, gender discrimination, patriarchy, slavery

The pages of history have substantial record of the fact that Afro- American society treated women merely as an object. They were only the source of merriment and were tormented by the males of both the races black and white. The social structure of the American society had it based in patriarchy. The white colonizers brought with them the tradition of slavery and slowly it was institutionalized. In 15th and 16th century the European focused on slave tradition and importation of labor. For this they first emphasized only on black males but due to shortage of time and lack of labors they encouraged the black women to get involved in order to support their families. The black women in order to get rid of their poverty and make their life better than before got involved and started working as labors where their masters conscripted them for intercourse in order to produce new and more labors. Thus this practice slowly became the fate of black women and they were brutally tortured by the whites. They disrobed them publically and beat them up using hot irons and whips. Their bodies were like the punching bags for the whites where they put all their efforts to gain

energy. Thus the whites never missed any chance to give pain to the Afro American Women. Bell Hooks in her essays says-

“Rape was a common method of tortured slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in psyche of displaced African females.”¹

In 1664 anti-amalgamation law was passed to stop the sexual relationship between white women and enslaved men, but it continued with the black women. There was no law to stop the sexual violence which occurred with black females and it was just because the planters recognized that they became financially strong by breeding black slave women, so the white men used to purchase the black women for their sexual appetite and abused them. Harriet Jacobs in her book *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* depicted the poor condition of black women and had written:

“Slavery is terrible for man but it is far more terrible for women.”²

The white males treated the black females as prostitute and paid them for the sexual activities but

those girls who denied performing those activities were molested forcefully by their masters. The famous Afro American women writer Alice Walker in her short-story has rightly said –

“Who knows that the black women think of rape? Who asked her? Who cares?”³

From the post- antebellum period we see a significant change in the status of blacks, as they got rights for voting and were educated. But still they were treated as inferiors. The poems of Langston Hughes mirror the true account of the period. . In spite of being more educated and active than before the black women were not able to change their fate. They continuously protested against the sexual exploitations but they failed because there was no solidarity. The women who lived in urban areas considered it as their fate. This difference in the thinking of black women of urban and rural areas helped the whites to oppress them even after they got liberation.

To get rid of this harassment they raised their voices for similar rights as the whites and amalgamated with them. After the Civil war and the Reconstruction Era the black women plunged into the Feminist Movement. By holding hands of white women the black women formed sisterhood and started protesting against the sexual exploitation. So Bell Hooks in her book writes “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression”⁴. The black women who were tortured by the males of both the races black and white wanted to end the patriarchal system and sexism. Their prime concern was women liberation. The feminist to raise their consciousness formed a group called Conscious Rising Group. The member of this grouped organized meetings in which they discussed how to deal with sexism. With the starting of second wave of Feminism they turned toward academic premises to make the movement stronger. College going girls were also joined them. They moved throughout the country, organized campaigns, Seminars and expressed their feelings. They also picked the pen and make it their most powerful weapon. The women who plunged into this movement are Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, Hoyt. W. Fuller and Rosa Guy. Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed was also part of that

movement. Moraga and Anzaldua’s in their work *This Bridge Called My Back (1983)* wrote about their experience of women of color and sufferings. It is played a vital role in the Black Feminist Movement and linked the feminist all over the world. Morrison *The Bluest Eye* and Walker’s *The Color Purple* also showcased the sexual violence and its effect on the black women. Pecola , the female protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* ruined by her father and compelled to live a life full of misery whereas Celie the female character of *The Color Purple* was finally able to transform herself after bearing thousand pain. The bad experience of sex forced Audre to move towards lesbianism which she expressed through her novel *Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name*. Thus the women with the coming of third wave became louder than before and revealed all their problems before the world. They tried to make their own identity; they wanted to omit the word suppressed and oppressed from their life dictionary. Bell Hooks through her writing motivated the black women to come forward and fight for their own rights, where she says

“Being oppressed means the absence of choice.”⁵

Thus in the third wave of feminist movement the black feminist became globalized and as compared to the first and second wave it gained more power and equality. Now the black women have an identity of their own, they have their voting rights; they are now seen in school and colleges. Despite suffering violence the Afro American Women were able to got rid of all those issues and have their own identity. Writers like Toni Morrison received Nobel Prize in Literature where as Alice Walker won Pulitzer Prize and registered their name in the History Of Afro American Literature.

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