

DARK TALES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

The life of the blacks is the subject matters of the theme of Toni Morrison's novels. There is no joy and calmness in their life on account of the racial discrimination created by the whites under these circumstances their life becomes very complex. Toni Morrison, with her exquisite craft woman ship invariably delineates the triple oppression of color, class and gender and as these three issues interact each other, they are interdependent. She is keenly aware of the stress and strains of women. Moreover she has developed an appreciation for the purity of her gender. She is conscious of the fact that God has created all men and women equal. But it is man who has been responsible for introducing into the world diversity and inequality based on color, and racial discriminations have resulted in disorder.

Key Words: African- American, Racial Discrimination, Suppression

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A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble
And never a laugh but the moans come double,
And that is life... (Dunbar'29)

As world is fast growing with its multifaceted development at one side, there is always a dark-side that has to be dealt seriously with. In the globalized context, the problem of marginalized groups of people all over the world and their social, ethnic, economic and cultural conditions gain importance in every sphere of growth and knowledge Marginality with all its aspects is indeed a major problem to be reckoned with in the world invariably, they are impoverished people constituting of minority group. Marginality is also based upon creed, religion and race. Marginalized section of society are generally beyond the pale of the dominant culture.

Democracy all over the world has given all such marginal groups of people an opportunity to share freedom with their compatriots. It has made them aware of their human rights and civil liberties. They enjoy the right of franchise which is a political weapon. In fact, education and freedom of expression give voice to the voiceless. The death of colonialism has given birth to political awareness and freedom creating thereby aspirations in the minds of the people for attaining equal status and dignity. There are sections of people who are deprived of equal opportunity and individual dignity. Naturally, they express their concerns, anxieties, and anguishes in their writing. They have a quest for their identity. Though they have dreams they confront nightmares. They explore their past to trace the roots of their origin to forge their future. Their literature is indeed a creative excavation for their heritage.

It is necessary to assess the social, economical, cultural, religious and psychological background of African-American in America in order to understand their literatures. Viewing the family as a social system with external and internal subsystems and viewing the black people as an ethnic sub society with strong features of common historical identity and participated conditions, it is possible to see not only that the structures of black family forms are highly varied, but also that carrying out the functions of family life for African –American is highly problematic and unique.

The most important set of family functions in America centre around the trilogy of sex, reproduction, and child rearing. These are both instrumental and expressive in quality. The socialization of children remains, perhaps, most exclusive domain of the family. It is within the intimate circle of the family that the child develops his personality, intelligence, aspirations and indeed moral character. Even here, however, the family does not act alone, but as the sub-system of the wider society.

Socialization of the African-American family is doubly challenging, for the family must teach its young members, not only how to be human, but also how to be a black in white society. The requirements are not the same. African-American families must teach their children very early in life, sometimes as early as two years of age, the meaning of being black. One middle class suburban African mother told Mel Watkins of the *New York Times*: "You can tell them that some people are ignorant or something like that, but they still have to get used to it. You can't hide them from reality. We've had the same experience. We had to learn to live with it they will too" (138-39).

The African people constitute an ethnic sub-society with a distinct history in the American society. Three facts stand out above all other essential elements of African-Americans' history: the first is that the African people came to America from Africa and not from Europe. The second is that they came in chains and were consequently uprooted from their cultural and family moorings. The third is that they have been subjected to systematic exclusion from participation and influence in the major institutions of the American society even to the present time.

Even though the Africans are treated for their uncultured nature in America, history shows that Africans have a civilization of thousand years old. A careful reading of history and ethnographic studies reveals a pattern of African backgrounds which are ancient, varied, complex and highly civilized. The evidence suggests that far from being rescued from a primitive savagery by the slave system, Africans were forcibly uprooted from a long history of strong family and community life every bit as viable as that of their captors. It was a very different type of society from the European-oriented society in the new world. The Africans brought to the United States were descendants of an ancient and honourable tradition of African family life.

African slavery stretching over a period of four centuries and involving the capture of more than forty million Africans, was, for the European countries, a colossal economic enterprise. But for the Africans, it was a colossal social and psychological disruption. The transportation of slaves from Africa to the New World completely disrupted the cultural life of the Africans and the historical development of the African-American people. First, moving from Africa to New World, the Africans were confronted with an alien culture of European genesis. Secondly the Africans came from different tribes with different languages, cultures and traditions. Thirdly they came without their families and often without females at all. In the fourth place they came in chains. These are all the major distinctions between the Africans and all the other immigrants in USA. Hence the Africans were not free to engage in the ordinary process of acculturation. They were not only cut off from their previous culture, but they were not permitted to develop and assimilate to the new culture.

The African slaves in the United States were converted from free, independent human beings once they were in Africa. They became chattels, this process of dehumanization started at the beginning of the slave-gathering process and was intensified with each stage along the way. It should not be difficult to discern that people, who, having been told for two hundred years are subhuman, should begin to believe this themselves and internalize these values and pass them to their posterity. The process of dehumanization of Africans provided superior opportunities, privileges, and status to the white majority at the expense of the black minority and deeply ingrained within White people a crippling sense of superiority.

While slavery was cruel and inhuman, it did not take the same pattern everywhere. There were important variations and degrees of cruelty, with differing consequences for the family life of the slaves. Slavery was very different in the United States from that of what it was prevalent in the Latin American countries.

Some evidence suggests that the living conditions were worse in the United States. The particular factors which characterize the impact of slavery on the African family in the United States include the absence of legal foundation, and protection of marriage as an institution among the slaves. The exploitation of slave women by white owners and overseers for both pleasure and profit, the systematic denial of a role for the man as husband and father, and the wilful separation of related men, women and children and selling them to different plantations were some of the worst system prevailing in slavery.

In short, there was an absence of societal support and protection for the African family as a physical, psychological, social and economic unit. In consequence, these conditions wrought for generations of Africans under the slave system which was direct and insidious. The society has made not only any massive efforts to undo the damages of slavery and actively integrate the Negro people into the society on the basis of equality, but many of the explicit conditions of slavery still exist at the present time.

Though the end of slavery with the civil war in the United States marked the dawn of freedom to the slave and the free African-American alike, it was also a crisis of major portions. For ten thousands of African-Americans, emancipation meant the freedom to die of starvation and illness. The African-American people have never been indemnified either economically, politically, socially, or psychologically. In fact, 'Emancipation' had some advantages for the African-American family. Although family members were whipped, run out of town or murdered, they could not be sold away from their families. Marriages were legalized and recorded. The hard work of farming, even sharecropping, required all possible hands of the family such as husband, wife, and children.

Emancipation then was a catastrophic social crisis for the ex-slave and 'Reconstruction' was a colossal failure. At the same time, there were some 'screens of opportunity' which did enable large number of families to survive, some to achieve amazingly stable and viable forms of family life, and a few to achieve a high degree of social distinction. Even the nomenclature, 'Negro' has been changed and now the Africans in America began to be called 'African-American.'

The African-American is caught between the 'American Dream' and the 'American Dilemma'. Being an African-American means a perplexing problem entangling him into a predicament which is the focal point of African-American literature. African-Americans are the sons and daughters of darkness journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings.

The African-American writers ask question such as 'What is America to me' and so on. But the African-American knows at the same time that his forefathers were brought to America in chains and auctioned on the shores of Atlanta. The black Americans have irrigated the fertile land of liberty with their blood tears and sweat. The white settlers defiled the African-American women and lynched them to death. The development and progress of America owes a lot to their labour which watered and manured American agricultural land and made it a cotton king. They strengthened the sinews of American industry too. Behind the crowning glory of America lies the blood, tear and sweat of African-Americans.

Africa, the land of their origin cannot altogether disappear from their memories which runs through their veins and occupies a special place in their hearts and souls. Though their conscious mind is filled with America, Africa is stuck forever in their psyche which makes themselves African-Americans. In fact their identity has undergone many phases –from colored to Negro, from Negro to Black, from Black to Afro-American, and now from Afro-American to African-American in order to preserve their originality. They are now

assimilated as complete African-Americans. Their long dark shadows fall across two continents of America and Africa. The history of African-American is a long passage of time telling a tale of two continents. Their forced exile has thrown them out of their own history, faith and culture.

African history has given them a full page, but American history only a small and narrow margin on its page. The tale of two continents however is not a midsummer night's dream. It is indeed a story of an endless hallucination of agony. But they are not disheartened. They regard this endless hallucination of agony as a kind of liberation through which they rejuvenate themselves. From Richard Wright's *Native son* to Alex Haley's *Roots*, the African-American literature deals with the essence of African identity caught in perpetual crisis which, however, does not eclipse their optimism: 'We shall overcome someday'. However long and dark the night be, there is certain to be a dawn.

African American literature is not merely a branch of the Euro- American literature but a development of the African American oral traditions. Socio-Cultural differences shaped the double consciousness, socialized ambivalence and double vision among Africans and which ultimately are contextualized in the works of African American writers. Social and cultural boundaries are therefore as important as social and cultural changes in shaping the form and content of African- American literature. In the struggle against slavery, the literature was a means of exposing its evils. Many great works of African American literature focus on the African experience and depict race relations in certain times and places. The slavery experience is examined in many of the best known works of African American literature.

The African-American writers seek to define, chronicle and theorize the experiences of black people in America as victims of societal, physical and ideological racism. They try to expose the consequent impact on the development of their distinctive culture and consciousness. In fact, their quest was to record the longings of their people to attain self-conscious manhood. The feeling of being an African has been repeatedly expressed in their novels. They wanted to preserve their cultural legacy while adopting white traditions. The major literary dilemma of the African-American novelists was how to be true to their own vision of reality and yet to catch the attention of the white readers. In the twentieth century, African-American novelists were enthusiastic to express their feelings and reveal their souls not just to white Americans but to the entire universe. The inferiority complex born out of their colour slowly died and they began to consider their colour a spur for their creativity, and a sign of their distinctive cultural identity. In the 1970s, African American literature reached the mainstream as works by Black writers continually achieved best-selling and award-winning status.

Toni Morrison as a novelist has made an indelible mark on the annals of African-American women's writing through a changed focus in her discourse. Her uniqueness as a writer lies in her being a critique of black community itself that has consciously or unconsciously internalized racial stereotype that has persistently thwarted African-American woman sensibility and her definition of a self. Such a predicament of an African woman in America which in a way echoes her own is summed up by Morrison herself: The black woman had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything and out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself (63).

Morrison brings out the trends prevalent in the cultural stream of the contemporary African community. Her concern lies in human beings who want to live a meaningful life balancing between the order and disorder. These opposite forces play a key role in raising the conflicts of Morrison's novels which question the institutions like family, church, school, government that paralyse the lives of many African-Americans. Sexism which is integrally

connected with racism in the African-American society also is a major part of conflict. Besides establishing the existence of sexism in African-American communities Morrison challenges the prevailing definition of women especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality.

Arguably, no group of white women has confronted such an intensity or magnitude of dehumanization and exploitation as that of a black woman. The African-American woman was forced to accept a facet of American history that was forged which endorsed the perpetuation of white racial imperialism, sexism, black patriarchy and classism right through the harrowing times of slavery down to the contemporary capitalist ethos. Brought to America in the early part of 17th century to promote its capitalism, she was divested of her basic right to existence as a human being. The first casualty of African-American woman while being forced into the slave market was her racial dignity and humanity which eventually resulted in the repression of herself awareness. Not only that, she also had to reconcile to the identities foisted on her. A facet of African woman's life that provides insight into her interior reality is largely emphasized by her sexual life. Rape was the *modus operandi* practised by the white men to subjugate black woman that further instilled terror in her psyche, as she was alienated from her culture and native land. Further the rape of African woman by her own compatriot is an avid testimony that he merely imitated his master which once again proves the patriarchal domination all over the world.

The African-American women's consciousness is evolved out of the culture she belongs to and the culture she has acquired, questioning her own marginalization, dehumanization and exploitation. Her consciousness is continuous and evolving and her identity is accordingly forged. The four hundred years of African woman's history has moulded her sexual, biological and individual 'self' as she has confronted two dominant literary traditions namely White and Black, which are exclusively male. It has to be mentioned that black and female experience has been evolved from the African-American cultural experience.

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