



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 5 Sayı: 23 Volume: 5 Issue: 23

Güz 2012 Fall 2012

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

THE SUFFERS OF BLACK WOMEN IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVELS *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND *MERIDIAN* AND TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS *BELOVED* AND *THE BLUEST EYE**

Bülent Cercis TANRITANIR**

Yasemin AYDEMİR***

Abstract

In this study "the suffers of black women" in Alice Walker's novels *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* and Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, the popular and significant works of African-American Literature are examined. It is obvious that the authors' source knowledge about suffers of the black women is their life experiences in the black community. One can say that being colored women, both Walker and Morrison have the advantage of portraying what it is to be a woman of color in the society. It is obvious that their slave ancestors and the years of struggle of woman rights give them the opportunity to create life-like characters in their novels.

Key Words: Suffers of Black Women, African-American Literary Works, Racism in Afro-American Literature

Introduction

It is obvious that genders decide the position of people all over the world. This truth charge genders, especially women. If they are not only females but also colored, it becomes much more difficult to live in any community. They are separated from the society. They have to endure all the violence and racist behaviors of both white men and women. In addition to these, a colored women not only struggle against racist society, but also she has to suffer at the hands of black men.

Being aware of these facts, both famous contemporary writers, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison aim to portray the experiences of black women in their novels. Both Walker and Morrison "...deepen our understanding of the limitations and possibilities of lives of black Americans..." (Bell, 1987: 269) They are African-American writers. "This is evident in the way that Walker has passed on some of Southern heritage in her fiction" (Lauret, 2000: 96). Likewise, Morrison expresses her knowledge about black life creating fictional characters. "Morrison's strengthening of definitions and focusing of perception is reflected in the novels' narrative structures" (Birch, 1994: 151).

* This article is produced from the same titled Ma. thesis of the author and her consultant.

** Asist. Prof. Dr., Faculty of Letters, Yüzüncü Yıl University

*** Teaching Staff, Çaycuma Vocational School, Bülent Ecevit University

After 1970s, African American literature emerged as one of the important part of American Literature most of the African-American writers of 20th century; especially dealt with experiences of Blacks. Black writers of contemporary American fiction, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have focused on suffer and struggle of Blacks in the United States. As they were black writers, both of them emphasized that to be a black woman is more different than to be a woman. Not only Walker's novels *Meridian* and *The Color Purple* but also Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* have presented how Black women could survive in hard conditions. Both of the writers demonstrated the African-American women's life vividly and the characters in their novels have suffered beyond what one can think human being can endure. Reading these important works; one can see the reasons of why black women suffer and the problems that black women face.

1.The Suffers of Black Women in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize, "The Color Purple" is "...the story of Celie, a poor, barely literate Southern black woman who struggles to escape the brutality and degradation of her treatment by men" (Gates, Jr- Appiah, 1993: 16). Although it is not easy to get rid of the patriarchal society, the protagonist manages to overcome these conditions. Black community; itself have lots of obstacles that prevent black women from realizing their identity. Among these handicaps, there are rape and incest and color.

1.1. Rape and Incest

Walker's novel *The Color Purple* begins with the scene of rape. When the protagonist of the novel, "...Celie is 14...stepfather, whom she believes (because nobody talks about the lynched) is her father, begins to rape her..." (Walker, 1996: 50) She cannot tell this trauma anybody. At first, her stepfather starts to do this when her mother is not at home. Then he says "...you better shut up and git used to it" (Walker, 1985: 3). Celie's expressions show how difficult position she stays. "But I don't never git used to it. And now I feell sick used to it. I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long" (3).

The rape scene of the novel "...is based on Walker's great-great-grandmother, who was raped and impregnated at age 11 by her master Walker's great-great-grandfather" (Winchell, 1992: 85). As seen, this abuse is related to a real event and it is written by the writer to demonstrate what a black female live. This event reveals "...the portrayal of black family..." (86) The writer suggests that "...child-rape, incest..." (Birch, 1994: 222) is an undeniable fact of most blacks' lives.

The reason of significance of the Celie's rape scene is that there is not a race issue. Celie is black and her stepfather is black, as well. This incident displays that being a member of a black family is dangerous for a female. These facts are the representatives of a black female's life. Celie is demonstrated "...the black woman as oppressed ..." (Evans, 1984: 163)

1.2. Color

Even in black community, the degree of blackness shapes the behaviors of people. In *The Color Purple*, the mistress of the protagonist's husband is a good representative of color of skin. Even though she has a dark black skin, "She is the woman in control of her life" (Walker, 1996: 52). She is more different than Celie. "She is gorgeous and knows it, with only positive thoughts about her very black skin—since during this period the black and lighter-skinned black woman had about the same chance with black men" (52).

Knowing the position in the black dominated society, Shug Avery acts independently and warns Celie not to be dependent on black males. Similarly, Mr. _____'s sister, Kate also advises Celie about fighting. "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (Walker, 1985: 21). Nevertheless, Celie is afraid of black males' brutality and states "I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (21).) After so many years, by the help of the black women, Sofia,

Shug and Nettie she becomes brave and "...Celie frees herself from her husband's repressive control" (Gates, Jr. – Appiah, 1993: 16). The focus of the novel is "... black women's struggle for independences" (17). The efforts of the protagonist end in success.

2. The Suffers of Black Women in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

Published in 1976, *Meridian* focuses especially on the protagonist of the novel, Meridian's involvement in the civil rights movement. In *Meridian*, Walker expresses "...inner struggle..." (Cooke, 1984: 158) of especially a black woman, Meridian Hill. She suffers from struggle, violence, rape and racism in this novel.

2.1. Struggle

The fight of protagonist of the novel starts when "she leaves her husband and gives up her child, distances herself from her devout Christian mother and devotes her life to activism" (Lauret, 2000: 60). She has to struggle with different types of obstacles because of her "... insistence on the sacredness of life" (Evans, 1984: 466). The necessity of this struggle is given in *Meridian* as "...there are times in a person's life when to risk everything is the only affirmation of life" (Walker, 1986: 133). Thus, Meridian ignores lots of things for her people and without hesitations she devotes herself to Revolution. Meridian's only struggle is not for the women's rights, it is also for destroying "...racial oppression" (Birch, 1994: 211).

In *Meridian* there is "...a process of struggle and suffering for black and white together and for men and women together" (Lauret, 2000: 63). Both black and white people, who are students at Meridian's college, do not give up their hopes saying "We shall overcome...We shall overcome, someday...Deep in my heart, I do believe...We shall overcome, someday..." (Walker, 1986: 48)

2.2. Violence

In *Meridian*, Walker writes about "...the possibility of interracial love and communication, the vital and lethal strands in American and black experience, with violence and non-violence and self-hatred" (Gates, Jr.- Appiah, 1993: 9). Most significant themes of *Meridian* includes "...the estrangement and violence that mark the relationships between Miss Walker's black men and women" (17). Moreover, "...the most difficult paradox that Walker has examined to date is the relationship between violence and revolution..." (Evans, 1984: 466) The years of movement have witnessed the sharp strictness and violent sides of both government and society.

Even though being a Civil Right female worker depicts that Meridian will experience the hard conditions of the revolution, Walker implies that "...if Black women turn away from the women's movement, they turn away from women moving all over the world, not just in America" (467). In fact, being the writer of *Meridian*, Walker rejects "...the violent revolution..." (Birch, 1994: 209) Likewise, the protagonist of the novel Meridian has "joined the movement against racism" (213) for stopping the violent attitudes towards people. Her devotion takes lots of things but she doesn't give up her decision.

It is clear in *Meridian* that "...rigid and foolish force, on the one hand, and sanctimonious greed, on the other, stand as the only operative values in the society" (Cooke, 1984: 162). In addition to this, the writer of *Meridian* Walker, "...examines the hatred and violence which result from the fear of difference" (Birch, 1994: 214). The exact reason of the violence during movement is race.

2.3. Rape

In *Meridian*, rape is seen as another side of violent behavior. "...rape, harassment, reproductive control and enforced childbearing are constituted in the novel as forms of violence ..." (Lauret, 2000: 66) In this novel, one of these aggressive behaviors is seen through a black man Tommy Odds. This colored man's "...rape of Lynne justified..., by the black man's need to liberate himself from white oppression by taking revenge upon white women" (66). Tommy Odds's hatred

of white people causes this violent behavior. Lynne is the only white whom he can touch in black society. "...Tommy Odds...rapes Lynne as an act of vengeance on white society" (74). It is obvious that "By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness" (133).

In *Meridian*, rape incident is seen again. Lynne's daughter Camara who is also black, like is father; Truman is raped by a crown man. "...his six-year old daughter... had been attacked by a grown man and was now lying nearly dead in the hospital" (Walker, 1986: 169). To Lynne, it is not easy to accept the rape of her daughter. She finds difficulty in expressing it. "Our daughter has been hurt"... "the kid's been beat up"... "There's been...an accident. Our child. Attacked..." (168) Even Camara is a little black child; she "...is raped and murdered..." (Gates, Jr. and Appiah, 1993: 10)

In the novel, the concept of rape is expressed by one of the teachers of Meridian Hill. Being a university professor Mr. Raymonds, sometimes helps Meridian and tells some of his students different stories of the past. One day, he emphasizes the violence of white men, stating "...exactly how many black women had reported rape at the hands of white men in the years between 1896 and 1963" (Walker, 1986 111). This expression displays that during most of the slave black women have suffered from the violent behaviors of white race.

3. The Suffers of Black Women in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Being the first novel of Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* portrays how a slave woman can suffer. It centers on the protagonist, Pecola's desire to have blue eyes, like her white friend. "...*The Bluest Eye* (1970) is an immigrated history of what it is to grow up black and female in the 1970s and 1940s..." (Matus, 1998: 2) It helps one to visualize the state of a colored girl. Began when Pecola is a child, her longing causes hardships to occur when she grows older. Her hatred shows itself as suffers including blackness and the beauty, racism, violence and rape.

3.1. Blackness and the beauty

Walker's novel "*The Bluest Eye* is about a lonely victimized, black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who is driven insane by her desire to have white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes..." (Peach, 1995: 24) The narrator of the story is Claudia is the best friend of Pecola who "...prays for blue eyes" (Guthrie, 1994: 93). At first, the features and good sides of being black in "... a small Midwestern community" (93) are displayed with "...a big, blue-eyed Baby doll" (Morrison, 1970: 20). *The Bluest Eye* centers on this doll to demonstrate racism. "Claudia herself, as the mature narrator, condemns the American concept of blonde beauty..." (Peach, 1995: 25)

Pecola and her family members all accept the expression of the people around them. "The community senses the Breedloves self-hatred and encourages it by agreeing that the Breedloves are ugly" (Kubitschek, 1998: 34). Thus, Pecola herself knows the truth that she is a colored person and ugly. As a member of black race "Pecola, suffering from a sense of self-loathing and false identity..." (Peach, 1995: 27) wants God to give her bluest eyes that are seen the mark of beauty in the community.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the superiority of white people is displayed by standards of beauty. Therefore, Pecola cannot live the happiness of being different and treated in a different way in white society. As the narrator of the novel, states the problem is not Pecola's and her family's "...ugliness, but their "conviction" of their ugliness that makes the difference" (Bloom, 1990: 13). Not only Pecola, but also the members of her family accept the state of ugliness and this acceptance causes them to experience nearly all evil racial and interracial acts of people.

3.2. Racism

The novel *The Bluest Eye*, begins with Morrison's comments "...on the movement's assertions of racial beauty" (Matus, 1998: 2). The political movements assertions of 1960s and 1970s, demonstrate that in fact the colored ones are beautiful. Likewise, Morrison aims to imply this thought by the help of her story. In the novel, "The self-hatred is often focused on the body as the

most obvious indicator of race; hair and color, for example, are recurrent concerns" (Peach, 1995: 28).

The real cause of the discrimination is color of people's skin in *The Bluest Eye*. "The poignancy of Pecola's victimization arises not only from the racism and resulting interracial conflicts...but also from the intraracial conflicts related to color ..." (Bloom, 1990: 12) In the novel the concept of black "...is a construct partly of the characters own making but mostly social, based on white definitions of blackness which associate it with violence, poverty, dirt and lack of education..." (Peach, 1995: 26-27)

Morrison states that the black females are only seen as housemaid or slaves at the hands of white race. Even, the white little children order something and they act as if they have no wish. The white people "...use to despise African Americans" (Kubitschek, 1998: 34). The colored women are always viewed as a person who should endure violence and hardness even they are at home. The black women should "...combat the waywardness of their husbands and children and the racism of whites" (McKay, 1988: 70).

3.3. Violence and Rape

In Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, the first act of violence seen through bad behavior of Claudia MacTeer. When a white baby doll is given her as a Christmas present, she wants to break it. Her family states their puzzlement "Now-you-got-it-up-what's-the-matter-with-you?" (Morrison, 1970: 21) Claudia accepts his violent behavior indicating "I destroyed white baby dolls" (22).

In fact, Claudia wants to learn the secret of beauty of white people. "Claudia's acts are motivated in the main by a need to locate the source of white beauty that is not immediately apparent to her" (McKay, 1988: 61). Even though she tears the white babies to pieces, she cannot adopt the superiority of white race. "But dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulse to little white girls" (Morrison, 1970: 22). This terrifying instance of Claudia is the result of this fact "...Claudia is envious of Shirley Temple..." (Bjork, 1992: 35) who is a little white girl.

The violent manners are also seen by means of Pecola's father, Cholly. He not only beats her daughter, but also rapes her, that is the signifier of incest occurring in a black family. Toni Morrison displays "...the emotional violence heaped, upon children by parents as a special concern" (Bloom, 1990: 13). Pecola is the representative of both psychologically and physically abused girl. "*The Bluest Eye* delineates how Pecola is repeatedly exposed to psychological violation, and how physical violation completes the psychological destruction" (Kubitschek, 1998: 30). Pecola's only concern is not having the bluest eye; she also wants to get rid of the racist behaviors of white people. Therefore, Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, "...bears witness not only to the trauma of the incest and rape that Pecola experiences, but to the trauma of pervasive racism" (Matus, 1998: 47).

4. The Suffers of Black Women in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Being Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987) is a prominent work awarded Pulitzer Prize. It is a story about "...a powerful account of mother love, murder, and the legacy of slavery..." ("*Toni Morrison*", 2009: 33246) Like Morrison's previous novels, *Beloved* focuses on "motherhood" (Kubitschek, 1998: 6). *Beloved* tells the story of a mother, Sethe who is a black slave female formerly. She suffers from slavery, racism, violence and rape.

4.1. Slavery

Morrison's novel *Beloved* "... is lovely based on the story of Mary Garner, a slave who killed her child and attempted to kill herself rather than return to slavery" (Peach, 1995: 93). Likewise, the protagonist of the novel Sethe kills her child and this murder does not become distant, each time it comes closer. In "*Beloved*" one can comprehend how difficult it is to be a slave woman at the hands of a slave-holder:

This cannot be denied that the reasons behind Sethe's murder of her own baby girl emerge due to the brutal sides of slavery. The violent act of Sethe has "...relation to slavery" (Kubitschek, 1998: 115). When "a cruel man called school-teacher becomes the master, the slaves attempt a group escapes" (116). During this flight some of the slaves die. "Sethe is stopped after she cuts two-year-old Beloved's throat with a hand saw. The child dies" (117). Sethe doesn't want "...her children to be taken back into slavery..." (Matus, 1998: 104)

The memory of past, takes Sethe to the cruel white man during slavery. "Schoolteacher's nephews brutally abuse Sethe sexually, sucking milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody" (Kubitschek, 1998: 116). This incident affects Sethe deeply and she always remembers the viciousness of white man and the murder of her own child. She cannot endure to see her daughter at the hands of this brutality. Therefore, she decides to kill her. "I got a tree on my back and a haunt in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms" (Morrison, 2004: 18).

Sethe dares to kill her child that influences her motherhood in a baddish way. "...Morrison indicates Sethe's response to the trauma of motherhood under slavery and in particular, Beloved's death" (Matus, 1998: 108). In addition to this, Morrison manages to demonstrate how the "...maternal loss..." (Bjork, 1992: 157) can be the ruin of a black female. "Sethe was powerless to keep her children from enslavement except by killing them" (Birch, 1994: 179). Portraying Sethe and her experiences of slavery, Morrison "...emphasizes both the enormity of slavery and the powerlessness of the black slave woman" (179).

4.2. Racism

In the novel *Beloved*, at first, blacks are at the hands of white people and they are slave. They have not only "...been abused by white men..." (Matus, 1998: 119), but also they begin to lose their humanity. Even, the black people aren't given permission to learn writing and reading. It is clear that "...if blacks could write they should not be treated as animals" (Rice, 1996: 103).

The female characters in the novel, especially Baby Suggs is brave to mention the inhuman acts of white race in her community. "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed," she said, "and broke my heartstrings, too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (Morrison, 2004: 104-105). Baby Suggs utterances help one to visualize the hardness of the black life in a racist surrounding.

In most parts of the novel, the racist thoughts and attitudes are displayed vividly. Knowing the truth that Sethe has killed her own baby daughter, Paul D insists to look over the newspaper pages. "Stamp Paid reluctantly shows Paul D the clipping from the newspaper concerning Sethe's crime. Even so, the very fact that he has kept the clipping is significant" (Rice, 1996: 110). Both of these characters know that if a black's face is seen on papers, there should be an unusual event, since black race is ignored even in newspapers. To white people, Sethe's act is seen as a "...private story" (111). In addition to this, there is a mystery meaning under this news. "The newspaper is the product of white society" (111). There is also an implication that the reason of Sethe's behavior is white race.

4.3. Violence and Rape

In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, at first violence is seen with the scene that shows the white men's attacking. The nephew of Schoolteacher attacks Sethe when her husband isn't at home. Especially, "...violence against women" (Kubitschek, 1998: 28-29) is the focus of *Beloved*. White nephews of Schoolteacher "...abuse Sethe sexually, sucking milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody" (116). Sethe expresses this brutality by saying "And they took my milk" (Morrison, 2004: 20).

It is an undeniable fact that "...slavery is brutal..." (Rice, 1996: 106) As Sethe also a slave woman, she experiences the evil of white race. She is also exposed to "...a whipping which almost kills her..." (Peach, 1995: 94) The horrors of slavery lead her "...to commit an act of violence against their child" (96). Although most of the black community sees this act as an unreasonable choice that is decided by a mother, Sethe explains that she should do it. As a mother, "...Sethe makes it quite clear that in her eyes she has done the only thing that she possibly can do" (Rice, 1996: 106). The fear of her race leads her to commit a crime. To Sethe, she didn't do "...anything wrong" (Kubitschek, 1998: 117).

In *Beloved*, not only the violence acts of white race and Sethe are seen, but also her dead daughter's presence has caused too much violent acts. At first, the baby girl who has been killed, appears as, "...a ghost in the house, that much we know; it is a ghost that shatters mirrors, that puts its "tiny hand prints in the cake..." (Bjork, 1992: 141) At the beginning of the novel, Baby Suggs states "We lucky this ghost is a baby" (Morrison, 2004: 6). On the contrary, in time the ghost's anger causes to come their house as a grown-up girl. Thereafter, she starts to show her rage towards Sethe.

She always asks questions about past and wants Sethe to feel pain in her heart. In the novel, "...the final vision of *Beloved* is grotesque-pregnant, inflated, swelling, and insatiable. She is in the process of feeding off and consuming Sethe's life..." (Matus, 1998: 119) It is apparent that "...the spirit is covertly attacking Sethe" (Kubitschek, 1998: 118). Soon, Denver realizes that "*Beloved* is trying to kill Sethe" (124). She attempts "...to kill her so that they will be dead together" (125).

Conclusion

Written with the impacts of experience of slave life, the social movements emerged in the United States during 1950s and 1960s and the violent racial forces, the novels of contemporary writers, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* succeed in displaying the suffers of colored women. The black characters in these novels try to endure gender discrimination, violence, racial attitudes and sexual abuse. These writers, especially Walker even deals with the forbidden issues, like incest, since she wants to show the truth of black women's life.

The protagonist of the novel *The Color Purple*, Celie, at first cannot do anything to object the brutality of both black men and white men. However, in time by the help of her female friends, like Sofia and Shug Avery, she realizes the fact that she has the right to act as she wants. After so many years of racial oppression, sexual abuse and brutality, she encourages herself to object all this hard conditions of black woman's life. She starts to struggle for liberation from hands of men, both black and white. She reaches her ideal plucking the chain of oppression. "...Walker is able to have her major character Celie to express the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her growing internal strength and final victory" (Evans, 1984: 469).

Likewise, in her novel *Meridian*, Walker portrays the struggles and suffers of a black woman, Meridian. Meridian aims to struggle for "...a reluctant world" (Cooke, 1984: 158). She longs for a society in which both blacks and whites have equal rights. During the acts, she and her friends are exposed to violence and punishment. However, they do not lose their hope for future. In *Meridian*, Walker "...reminds us the fact that suffering need not be random and meaningless, nor a centripetal human purpose without humor or hope, or mercy, or effect" (159). Despite all the obstacles that cause her to suffer Meridian doesn't give up the "...liberation struggle..." (Lauret, 2000: 73).

Similarly, Toni Morrison focuses on suffers of black females in a white society in *The Bluest Eye*. This novel "...shows racism's damaging effects on the black community at large and on black families" (Kubitschek, 1998: 27). In *The Bluest Eye*, a black girl Pecola Breedlove realizes the supremacy of white society and longs to have the features of white females. She starts his desires by

praying to have the bluest eye in the world. The superlative form of this word is used to demonstrate the willingness to have even more superior features than white race.

Morrison's other significant novel *Beloved* is very successful in displaying "...the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery..." (115) The protagonist of the novel, Sethe remembers the cruel times of slavery. The ghost of her baby girl does not leave her and her daughter, Denver. The spirit of her dead daughter changes into a grown girl and begins to disturb her life after so many years. She goes the place where she is killed by her own mother, Sethe. She always reminds her mother the brutality of slavery and the scene of murder.

It is obvious that these four novels of African-American writers, portray suffers of black women. Even sometimes suffers vary, like motherhood, violence, rape, the most important reason that causes their pains, is racism, that is their color. They are discriminated by the white society because of their God-given colors. They are seen as the objects that do not have any feelings. In novels of Walker and Morrison, some black female have the opportunity to find their identity and survive in the hard atmosphere of racial society. However, some black women characters do not dare to object the discrimination and prepare their lives' end.

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