

Oppression and Exploitation of Humans in the Works of Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi

Alka^{1*}, Prof. Sanjay Kumar Misra²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English R.B.S. College, Agra

² Professor, Department of English R.B.S. College, Agra

Abstract - There is a lot of similarity between the Afro-American literature produced by Toni Morrison and the tribal literature produced by Mahasweta Devi. Both the writers, through belonging to different continents exhibit tremendous concern for the marginals and the subalterns in their works. As a matter of fact, oppression and exploitation of humans is universal across the board. Torture and rape of women coming from the lower strata of society, and forcing of labour upon the men and their subjection to thrashing and killing have been going ever since the beginning of human society. Nobody knows when it will cease. The present paper makes an attempt to compare the nature of exploitation and oppression of the subaltern people, both men and women folks in the writings of Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi.

Keywords - Blacks, Whites, Tribals, Subalterns, Race, Caste, Colour

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of similarity between the Afro-American literature produced by Toni Morrison and the tribal literature produced by Mahasweta Devi. Both the writers, through belonging to different continents altogether exhibit tremendous concern for the marginals and the subalterns in their works. As a matter of fact, oppression and exploitation of humans is universal across the board. Torture and rape of women coming from the lower strata of society, and forcing of labour upon the men and their subjection to thrashing and killing have been occurring almost all over ever since the beginning of human society, and no one really knows when it will cease. The present paper makes an attempt to compare the nature of exploitation and oppression of the subaltern people, both men and women, in the writings of Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi.

The people of India and most parts of Asia and Africa are generally viewed as black or coloured people by the people of the West, Europe, America, Canada and Australia. It is also a well-known fact of life that there has been huge discrimination on the basis of race and colour. In Europe and America discrimination on the basis of religion is not as rampant and serious as the racial discrimination. The racial discrimination started in America and Europe with the import of the blacks from the African countries. The white imperialists, colonizers, rules and masters brought the blacks from the most impoverished regions of Afrika to their countries and exploited them for their advantage. Resistance against the humiliation and atrocities inflicted by the whites upon the blacks and the people

belonging to the lowest rung of the society began simmering as time passed and their exploitation continued. It soon took the shape of sustained and organized protest and gave rise to the cult of protest amongst the blacks and the tribals all over.

The people of the Indian subcontinent are all regarded by the west or the whites as the coloured people by and large; we are also racially different from the western people. In India the major population consists of the people believing in the Hindu faith. But the Hindu faith has a large number of castes and subcastes and there is tremendous social discrimination and separation amongst the Hindus. The tribal people are mostly Hindus but they are considered a lower caste in the Hindu society. The tribals are idol worshipers but the fact is that upper caste Hindus refuse to accept them as one of their own folks and socialize with them. The tribal men and women are exploited brutally and many are killed without any justifiable cause.

The story of the blacks in America is terrible. Such was the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the local whites who thought they were superior and supreme because they were not dark that the blacks almost ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. In an illuminating study of the origin of racism in the United States, entitled *White Racism: A Psycho History*, published in 1984, noted scholar and pioneer of eco-socialism, Joel Kovel remarked that a white master "first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed into a rising world

market of productive exchange” (18). Thus, began in America a long and repressive situation of the exploitation of the black people. The accounts of human lives led by the blacks in America during slavery are horrifying when one looks at them with a human perspective.

Toni Morrison's novels are famous for their epic themes, vivid dialogue and richly drawn characters. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1987), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) are amongst her finest works. Toni Morrison is also known for the Nobel Prize she was awarded in 1993 for her outstanding contribution to literature. The Prize committee commended her work by applauding her as one “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality”.

Morrison's novels embody protest against the traumatic conditions under which African-American lived in the white America. *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first novel. Its heroine Pecola, a black girl wants to have blue eyes because she relates beauty to being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, she will look beautiful and be able to win peoples affection and respect. Pecola's mother lavishes all her love and affection on her employer's children and beats her own daughter Pecola because of her ugliness. The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when Cholly, her own father rapes her. Pecola fiercely resists all the gestures/acts of ill treatment by remaining silent and then goes mad, believing that her long cherished dream of having blue eyes has been fulfilled. This novel powerfully projects the black's protests against racism which is the primary source of their oppression.

Sula is Morrison's next novel. Sula is the central character in the novel. She wishes to create her own self in order to come to terms with her identity as a black woman. In her struggle of creating her own identity she leaves the Bottom where she lives with her mother and friend. She keeps wandering for a period of ten years. She has many affairs, some with white men too. However, she finds people following the same boring routines everywhere; so, she returns to the Bottam where she is ridiculed for her adventures. Sula protests against all social conventions by remaining quiet and does what she feels correct. This novel embodies the protest by the blacks against the gender oppression by depicting the difficulties faced by Sula in creating her own self as a black woman.

Mahasweta Devi was a prolific writer who produced a huge body of writings comprising plays, novels and short stories. Her focus is on the Adivasi population especially belonging to the regions in and close to the states of West Bengal Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in India. Her writings present a harsh and realistic picture of the tribals and the downtrodden. Primarily written in Bengali, which was Mahasweta Devi's mother tongue, her writings have been profusely translated, notably by the renowned critic

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She was a very vocal political activist too fighting relentlessly for the cause of the betterment of the lives of the tribals. Her important works include *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*. She was honoured with various literary awards such as the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpith Award. She was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2009. Mahasweta Devi's novels are also the novels of protest against the exploitation of the subalterns, the tribals and the dalits living in the India dominated by the rich and the upper caste people.

The fictional world of Mahasweta Devi centres around the simple joys and sorrows of the marginalized; their exploitation and sufferings and conditions of abject poverty in which they are forced to survive and at the same time their struggle to survive against all odds. Her fictions are a virtual kaleidoscope of Indian subaltern lives; a close perusal of her work provides an actual and valuable glimpse of the underprivileged communities in India. They are a reliable barometer of human response to social forces and their effects. Her fiction unfolds the multifaceted socio-economic exploitation of the tribals and other dispossessed groups by the dominant caste/class hierarchies, added and abetted by venal government officials and indifferent political leaders. Her novels and short stories echo the anguish and protest of the subalterns. Her fiction articulates the inhuman subjugation of the tribals and dalits and other outcaste women.

The description of rape is common in Devi's stories as it is taken as the fate of the poor and the disadvantaged women living in the remote rural areas. The most brutal account of rape is presented in 'Draupadi', which is a short story. Draupadi is a young tribal woman with a well-shaped body. She is associated with the Naxalite Movement. In her bid of saving her colleagues from arrest she hoodwinks and misguides the police. She is arrested and on the command of the Senanayak, that is, the army chieftain, she is brutally raped by the personals of paramilitary force who hurl abuses on her and inflict all sorts of violence upon her body. Her nipples are severed from her breast; blood flows out from her genitals; yet she appears naked before the Senanayak making the mockery of the masculinity of those present there. This heinous crime is not done by any invader or any foreign enemy but by Indians, by men of her own country, and that too in a free India. There are many characters in Devi's stories that experience the “same boring routine” in their life. Having failed in their attempt to safeguard their respect, their chastity, their dignity, they become mute spectators of their own exploitation. Their silence is the only way of their protest.

It is worth mentioning here the comments of renowned postcolonial critic and equally renowned translator of Mahasweta Devi's works, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who describing her challenge in translating Devi's Bengali ethos into English, writes

in her Translator's Preface to Devi's story 'Draupadi': "The educated Bengali does not know the languages of the tribes, It follows that I have had the usual 'translator's problems' only with the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. In general, we educated Bengalis have the same racist attitude towards it as the late Peter Sellers had towards our English. It would have been embarrassing to have used some version of the language of D.H. Lawrence's 'common people' or Faulkner's Blacks. Again, the specificity is micro logical. I have used 'straight English', whatever that may be" (15).

After reading the works of Mahasweta Devi, one strongly feels like asking: is the condition of tribals, the subalterns and the low caste people any better after seventy-five years of India's independence? If one were to compare the condition of tribals in India with that of the blacks in America, one can easily see that the whereas the blacks in America were brought from Africa, the tribals, the subalterns and the people of lower caste in India are our own indigenous people. They belong to India and they also fought for the freedom of the country; yet they are subjected to so much atrocity, injustice and violence like the blacks were subjected during the period of slavery. People living in remote villages of India never assert their identity or individuality. Such is the social pressure of the higher caste people that if someone tries to assert his/her identity, he/she is either eliminated or crushed so brutally that the idea of adorning identity and self-respect never crosses the mind of these people.

There are societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of the characters of both the novelists. In Morrison's novels the blacks are the worst affected and in Devi's novels the tribals (who can be considered the blacks of India) are the worst affected. In both the societies women are doubly exploited physically and sexually. They are sexually exploited by both their own people and by others.

The blacks were left on with their African soul which was also taken away by imposing the white values on them. With the breakdown of their native values, they lost their authentic self. Every possible effort was made to make them realize that they were inferior to white race. The whites created the institutions which the blacks were made to live with and by. Here, in India, the upper caste and the powerful Indian people are often crueller than the white slave masters. The white slave masters imposed white values on the black. In India the upper caste people do not want the low caste people to accept any of their values. And if someone dares so he/she is thrashed and crushed. In India there is no need to foster inferiority feeling among the tribals, subalterns and the Dalits because they know it by birth that they are born inferior, they will remain inferior and they will die inferior.

A striking similarity between the Africans and the tribals is that both are coloured people, the blacks. And, to be black and that too a female is to suffer from

the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender prejudice. Being black the African women suffer from racism; being females they are the victims of sexual exploitation at the hands of the white masters as well as the blacks from their own community. The black women in America are made victim of triple jeopardy --- racism, sexism and classism. They are bound to suffer if they are born to black parents, tribal parents or dalit parents. They are to be used for the gratification of the lust of powerful, the rich and the upper caste people. They have no right to protest and even if they protest, everyone turns a deaf ear to their protest.

In the writings of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who is another distinguished writer known for powerful portrayal of the agony and trials of the blacks and whose novel *The Color Purple* (1982) has got a cult status in the literature on the ills and evil of racism and racist society, we come across female characters who are raped by their own fathers and family members; sometimes these ill-fated women have to bear and rear the children of their own father. In tribals rape is not a stigma. In many cases the relatives of the tribal women or low caste women intentionally become ignorant about what is going behind the curtain. The husband of the young wife who works as a maid at the house of the Zamindars or landlords or any other big man is fully aware of the bitter fact that his wife is giving some other service to her employer in addition to household work of cleaning and manual labour; but he keeps silent because he is helpless before the brute power and force of the landlord or the rich. He cannot do anything. He has to feed his children. He has to pay the rent of his hut and above all, he has to save his skin from being thrashed. Experiences and descriptions of this kind are found galore in life of and literature of blacks as well as tribals and subalterns. Sexual harassment of women is as old as history of human existence and so is the protest against this exploitation. We may boast that situation has undergone a change in the modern times, but it is an empty boast as women are soft targets even today in both big cities and remote villages.

Several feminist organizations in India and abroad have been actively engaged in resistance and protest against women's exploitation, but they often fail to achieve any significant change on the ground. But we can see that due to all the protests and struggles the African-American literature has become accepted as a saga, an integral part of the American literature. Similarly, the literature produced by Indian writers like Mahasweta Devi, Uma Parmeshwaran, Bama and many others has also assumed respectable position. It can be safely said, therefore, that there is much similarity between the Afro-American literature produced by Toni Morrison and the subaltern literature produced by Mahasweta Devi. Exploitation of humans is alike around the world. Women are raped and tortured. Men are thrashed and killed. This is going on for centuries

and nobody knows when it will come to an end or whether it will ever be stopped. In their works, both Morrison and Devi have given excellent amplification of the issues and concerns of the people who face oppression and exploitation on the basis of caste, colour, race and gender.

WORKS CITED

1. Devi, Mahasweta. *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Rights of the Forest). Trans. Leela Sarkar. Kottayam: DC Books, 1992. Print
2. Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2018. Print
3. Kovel, Joel. *White Racism: A Psycho History*. New York: Grove Press, 1984.
4. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage International Publications, 1987. Print.
5. Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. London: Vintage International Publications, 1977. Print
6. Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. London: Plume Publications, 1973. Print.
7. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage International Publications, 1970. Print.
8. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1983. Print
9. www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/facts/

Corresponding Author

Alka*

Research Scholar, Department of English R.B.S. College, Agra